

NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES
OFFICE OF ARCHIVES AND HISTORY



Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with Connie Regan-Blake

SHE.OH.022

February 20, 2020

Interview Information:

Interviewer: Ellen Brooks

Interview Location: Asheville, NC

Interview Runtime: 03:29:15

Transcribed By: Gretchen Boyles, June 2020

Reviewed By: Sarah Waugh, June 2020

Collection: "She Changed the World" Oral History Project

Interview Summary:

This oral history interview with Connie Regan-Blake covers her general life history with a focus on her role in the folk storytelling revival movement, beginning in the 1970s, and her career as a professional storyteller. Regan-Blake and her cousin Barbara Freeman toured as "The Folktellers" tandem storytelling duo beginning in 1975, and created Asheville's longest running theatrical performance, "Mountain Sweet Talk." Prior to that, Regan-Blake told stories for the Chattanooga Public Library's "Making Our Reading Enjoyable" program. In 1995, Regan-Blake began her solo storytelling career, and joined with the Kandinsky Trio to create the *Tales of Appalachia* chamber music and storytelling show. In addition, she continues telling stories as a solo performer and facilitates storytelling workshops.

Regan-Blake was born in Mobile, Alabama, and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, and Jacksonville, Florida. She received her higher education degree in Louisiana, from Loyola University New Orleans. In 1973, Regan-Blake moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where she worked at the Chattanooga Public Library. From 1975 to 1978, she toured the country in a pick-up truck telling stories, after which she settled in Asheville, NC, and left for tours from her permanent residence. In Asheville, she met her husband, Philip, and they live there today.

In the interview Regan-Blake discusses her childhood career aspirations and how they changed over time. She talks about her education, early jobs waitressing at hotels, and travelling Europe after college.

Regan-Blake describes her beginnings in storytelling with the Chattanooga Public Library, and how she gravitated towards traditional storytelling after telling at the National Storytelling Festival. She shares her and Barbara Freeman's choice to become professional touring storytellers, starting in 1975, and describes the folk revival scene as they toured through festivals, naming many other influential figures throughout the interview. Regan-Blake recounts settling in Asheville, meeting her husband, and creating and performing "Mountain Sweet Talk" along with Freeman and others. She discusses why she and Freeman ended their storytelling partnership in 1995, and tells of her work with the Kandinsky Trio as a solo performer. After, she relates her involvement with the non-profit BeadforLife.

Regan-Blake discusses her collection in the Library of Congress, and describes her philosophy about storytelling, leading into a discussion on her workshops. She notes the challenges in being recognized for her achievements, as a woman. Finally, she asserts her belief in the importance of

sharing appreciation for good work, which she applies when teaching workshops. Regan-Blake continues to tell stories professionally and lead storytelling workshops.

Biographical Sketch

Connie Regan-Blake (nee Regan) was born on January 20, 1947 in Mobile, Alabama, to Mary Agnes Freeman Regan and John Gordon Regan. She has two siblings, John Gordon Regan Jr, and Bonnie Marie Regan. She attended St. Paul's Catholic School (1953-1955) , Christ the King Elementary School (1958-1961), Bishop Kenny High School (1961-1965) and Loyola University New Orleans (Bachelors, 1965-1969). Regan-Blake and her husband, Philip Roger Blake, live in Asheville, North Carolina. She has become one of America's most celebrated storytellers since beginning in the 1970s revival and continues storytelling and teaching storytelling today.

Archivist's Note:

Transcriptions reflect the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility, transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript. Timestamps are approximate.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of SHEOH_022_01]

Brooks: Today is February 20, 2020. This is an interview with Connie Regan-Blake, who is one of America's most celebrated storytellers and a founding foremother of the storytelling revival that began in the 1970s. The interview is being conducted for the North Carolina State Archives "She Changed the World" Oral History Project. The interviewer is Ellen Brooks.

So, we're just gonna start at the beginning. If you can tell me where and when you were born.

Regan-Blake: I was born in Mobile, Alabama, and that was back in 1947 in January--January 20.

Brooks: Okay. And did you grow up in Mobile?

Regan-Blake: No, I spent--we spent--my very young days there, and then we moved to Birmingham, Alabama, and that's where I spent some of my formative years. I have an older brother and older sister, and we lived up on Red Top Mountain, which I just revisited. My husband and I went down there, uh, and saw the old house. But then in the--when I was going to the third grade, my family moved to north Florida. My mother's family was originally from Nashville, Tennessee--that's where she was born and raised--and two of her brothers and her father--her mother and father--had moved down to a little town in Florida called Palatka. And my dad worked for the government, and he got a job at the closest place, which was Jacksonville, and then that's really where I spent my growing-up time.

Brooks: Okay, great. And, uh, tell me what your parents did for a living.

Regan-Blake: My dad was a, uh--worked for the Internal Revenue Service--and he, um, was like a mediator. He would try to solve, uh--he would bring in people and try to see if he couldn't come to an agreement as the last step before someone had to go to court. And so, he was a great listener, and he had a really kind, kind of gentle, and clear way of talking. He loved the English language, and that's one of the things that I remember a lot about growing up. Sometimes I didn't necessarily know all the words he was saying, but he would say 'em in context so that you got a sense of what the words meant.

My mom, um, worked before she got married but--she worked at a department store in Tennessee--but, um, she was a stay-at-home mom. She had incredible energy for a lot of different things, and she was, um, a volunteer for the elections division down in Jacksonville--and maybe did it in Birmingham before that--would go out and encourage people to register to vote. She also--I remember working--her working--on raising money for March of Dimes. And then she

worked a lot for the church. Um, we were raised Catholic, and she ran a thrift shop which, um, my dad, being into numbers--and he loved coins--he was a coin collector--and uh, so my mom would bring home--a lot of times things were a nickel or a quarter or a dime at this thrift shop--a lot of times they gave things away--but dad would go through and count it all--see if there were any coins he wanted for his collection, and then he kept a record. She raised over \$100,000 in nickels, dimes, and quarters over all those years, and so she did a lot of that. She also, um, loved fashion--not in a way of buying lots of clothes, but she had a keen eye for things--so she put on, as fundraisers for the church, fashion shows. And she was often--ended up being--in those as well. So, she did a lot besides, uh, raise us kids but did not have a job outside the home for most of her years.

Brooks: And what type of kid were you?

Regan-Blake: I was, um, pretty smart, I think, and in school I excelled. I had a good imagination, and looking back on it--I would not have said this at the time, I don't think I had this awareness--but looking back on it, as far as being a storyteller, I think a lot of my skill was in listening. I can really remember sitting around the dinner table—I mentioned that we moved to Florida to be with family. There was still one brother of Mom's that lived in Tennessee--Uncle Bill--and he and his family would come down to Florida. So often it was fifteen or eighteen of us. Um, we actually gathered--usually--two to three, maybe even four, times a year, uh, at Christmas, Thanksgiving, often at Easter, and even in the summertime. And, uh, sometimes we would start off at breakfast around the dinner table, and we would still be there at lunch time. And so, I think I had that listening, uh, part of me then. There were a lot of family stories told and told on one another. A lot of the brothers were big jokesters, especially two of them.

[00:05:37]

But, um, I also love to play. I loved to ride horses, and one of those uncles had horses, and so we spent a lot of our time down there on that farm with my cousins and riding horses. That was just--the dream life for me was to be able to go out bare-back riding with just a bridle and go racing down these back-dirt roads. And, um, I remember, um, doing, you know--when I lived in Birmingham, so I would have been even younger then--under eight years old--I remember there being stories about a cave up behind us on that Red Top Mountain that had quicksand around it, and it was a dangerous place for kids to go. I never did find out if that was really true, but I can remember worrying [laughs] about that, and uh, so that was definitely in my imagination.

I enjoyed school. My best year was third grade. Um, but I usually, you know, was a pretty good kid, so I connected usually with my teachers and enjoyed them and such.

Brooks: What made third grade the best year?

Regan-Blake: I think it was my teacher, Ms. Hankelmeyer [??]. Um, she saw in me--she really encouraged me to read, and I already--I didn't have any real trouble learning how to read--but she's the one that then sent me starting to go to the library. And I just would read book after book after book after book. And I was kind of a teacher's pet, so I really liked that attention too. And I actually got to see her in--lots later--years. She continued teaching for many years, but after she retired, she came to several of my performances, and that was really thrilling for me--and for her, I think.

Brooks: And then as you got older and to middle school and high school, did you have, um, favorite subjects in school?

Regan-Blake: Math. Math was always--actually when you were introducing us and introducing this tape, I love that today is "2" "20" "20" "20." I've always loved numbers, and when, um, I was in high school, I really thought that I would go away and eventually get my doctorate in math. And my dream at that time was to work with NASA, um, with the Kennedy Center--what's now the Kennedy Center--and to help put people into outer space. I didn't have any desire to actually go to be an astronaut or anything, but that calculat--those calculations--kind of thing was, uh, important to me. And I only recently remembered--uh, someone, I think, had found this and in interview asked me about it--and I was so delighted to be reminded that--um, I went to Catholic school all the way through except in third grade--that might [laughs] have been another reason--[Brooks laughs] I'm not sure if that was another reason it was a favorite--but that was the only year that I went to, um, a city school there in Jacksonville--they couldn't get us enrolled in Catholic schools--but I literally went all the way through sixteen years, so fifteen years was in, uh, Catholic school. And when I was in eighth grade, uh, there was a contest for a scholarship to the Catholic high school--I was gonna be going anyway--but it was to help with those funds, and it was to take, um, one of the Bill of Rights and write about it. And the one that I chose was, uh, the--that we were all could have--it was a built-in right for us to have fair trial, and I remember that--uh, I remember writing that it was better for--this actually causes me some emotion, I think because recently--I'll tell you why in a second--but, um, it was better for ninety-nine people that were guilty to go free than for one person that was innocent to be jailed. And just recently I've been down to Montgomery--I don't know if you've heard about Bryan Stevenson--he's the man that wrote *Just Mercy*. It's a book that my husband and I listen to on audio, and he started the Equal Justice Initiative, and his passion in life has been working with people that are, um, on death row, and mostly blacks--people of color--and in Alabama--he came down from Harvard. And so, he's opened two places in Montgomery--the Peace and Justice Memorial and, uh, the Legacy Museum.

[00:11:09]

So, I think that's always been an undercurrent in my life, but I was so tickled to kinda be reminded of that--that I actually wrote a paper. But I enjoyed all the subjects. I enjoyed English. I remember when I was a freshman in high school--we took four years of Latin, and I remember really getting into Latin [laughs]. Sister Vincent was the--um, our--teacher, and I just enjoyed it, you know. I didn't enjoy any other languages per se. I don't think that I have exactly an ear for that. But I--in general enjoyed school and did a lot of playacting. That's something else that, um, I was just reminded of in the last few years. There was a group of about six or seven of us that, before school, would act out these little vignettes when I was in high school--all girls high school. And, uh, so I really got into that as well.

Brooks: Um, and what was your first job?

Regan-Blake: My very first job was babysitting when I was, you know, growing up for neighbors and such. Then, uh, the summer after--so I went away to Loyola in New Orleans for college--and my roommate was, uh--let me see if that was that year--you know I don't remember if I worked after my freshman year 'cause I think what I wanna tell you about was after my sophomore year 'cause my sophomore year of college, I had a roommate who was from Colorado. And she encouraged me to apply for a job, at the Broadmoor Hotel--a very fancy hotel that is still in existence out in Colorado Spring--and they hired over a thousand college students in the summertime. And it's actually the ice-skating rink that is out there is where Peggy Fleming--one of the early Olympic winners--that's where she trained. So, I applied for the job, and I got it, so I travelled out to Colorado. It was the first time I had been above sea level except for going to Nashville, Tennessee a few times in general--the first time I was on a plane. And, um, it was an extraordinary experience. I loved it, and I ended up going out there the next summer as well--so two summers I worked out there. And it seems a lot of things are connected. The person that trained me--I waitressed--and this was, uh--waitressing there--some of them--they called them stations 'cause a lot of people came for the whole summer, and I remember some of the people inherited their stations. Their older sister would have worked and waited on those same people, and I didn't have any older siblings that had been there, but I did get to wait on Jack Benny and, um, also waited on a woman who was an older woman, and her husband had passed away, but she and her husband had, um, gone to the Broadmoor for their wedding honeymoon, and they must have been incredibly wealthy. They had stored all the furniture that was in their room on their honeymoon. They would--the Broadmoor would--store it all year and then reset that room, so even after her husband passed away, she was walking into the room that looked exactly like her honeymoon. That always moved me, so I loved that. I loved that connection with the people. But the person that trained us, uh, a lot of years after that--probably at least fifteen or twenty years after that--I went back to the Broadmoor to perform and give a workshop, and she was still there--[laughs] the person--and I don't really know that she remembered me. She graciously said she did, but, uh, that was a real thrilling--so I love moments where I get to come back, you know, where things kind of circle around in a beautiful way.

[00:15:51]

Brooks: Yeah, um, can you tell me how you chose Loyola for college?

Regan-Blake: Part of it was because my dad was born and raised in New Orleans, so I felt that real connection there, and my sister had gone to Loyola. She was a dental hygienist, so she was there. She studied that for two years and got an associate degree there. And I think that I applied to a few other places, but Loyola was really on the radar from the very beginning. My dad never got to go to college. He was, uh, very poor and had a real struggle financially--his family did--uh, lived right on a teetering edge--really was in poverty. And, uh, so--but I think he had got a full scholarship when he was in eighth grade to Jesuit High School in New Orleans. And so, I think I always had, um, a respect and kind of an awe for the Jesuits 'cause he would talk about that sometimes. And of course, Loyola is a Jesuit university, so that's probably one of the reasons too.

Brooks: Um, and apart from your travels to Colorado, how else was college--kind of like a new experience and full of adult firsts and things?

Regan-Blake: Well, the drinking age was eighteen, and, uh--but my family--you know, I'd definitely tasted a little bit of beer or something--it wasn't like I had done much of that--in high school a little bit here and there, but not much. And I never did become a big-time drinker, but I remember that being very different. Going into bars--that's something that I had never done. And going into--you know in New Orleans, even though this was--went to, uh, 1965 and graduated in '69, so this was a long time ago--again this reflection--at the time, I don't think that I thought this was that unusual, um, 'cause sometimes I think that, as we go through life, we don't necessarily compare our experiences. Especially when you're young and just coming into adulthood, we don't realize, Oh, other people aren't doing this or whatever. But I also went to several gay bars and, you know, that was a big thing in New Orleans even though it was outlawed in most places around the United States at that time. Loyola was really on a leading edge with that. And I remember looking back on that--because I have several people that I, uh, have coached with and good friends that are gay and are LGBTQ--and, um, looking back on it now--even though I was raised very strict Catholic--I really had none of those kinds of prejudice against people that might be different than I was.

Brooks: Um, and, uh, what were you studying? What was your major?

Regan-Blake: So I started off in math, and uh--but when I got there--I realized I had never--I'd always just been good at math. I had never learned to study math, and that was an interesting, uh, distinction [laughs] that I realized, and I struggled some in that very first year. And Loyola had just gone--had relatively recently gone coed. And they didn't have many people--many, uh, women--from out of New Orleans. They had very limited housing. The very first year I was there, they didn't even have a

dorm. We were in houses, um, around the university that they had converted to small dorms. And it turned out that people--uh, the Catholic schools in New Orleans that fed Loyola--they were ahead of us in Jacksonville on the ways that they were teaching math, and it was what, at the time, was called "new math." So a lot of people in my classes that were majoring in math kind of already had this, and I remember, uh, struggling with it some.

[00:20:13]

And--I can't remember for sure if it was in freshman year or it was going in--if it was already into sophomore--but the director of that department, uh, math department, pulled me aside, you know, and--I wasn't failing, but I had anticipated being at the top of the class, and that wasn't happening, and I didn't like that--or at least being up there--I didn't need to be number one, but at least being up in the top five--and I remember him talking to me and saying, uh, "Well you know you could always, uh--might not be the brilliant mathematician that you've been anticipating, but--you could always teach math." And--which I've resented--at the time and past--then in future years I resent it for different reasons 'cause I thought that was a little obnoxious for him to say that. But I am grateful to him because, um, I might have still continued right on that path. And what happened instead--I decided to go into political science, which, as I say in some of my performances if I happen to be talking about some of my background or--I love in small audiences to be able to open it up to questions before I finish that last story if it's, you know, an intimate audience sometimes I'll see if anyone has questions, and people will often ask me, and sometimes I'll say that I thought that I might be a politician, which some people say is a good background for storytelling. But, um, I thought--I did consider that I might go into politics, and I also thought I'd be a lawyer, so that's maybe how I s--and I kept my minor in math. This was in the day, literally, when it was a huge double-walk-in-closet-size space for the computer we had, um. But--so I kept that minor in math, and, as I got closer to graduating, I had sent, you know--gotten some information about law schools and stuff--but I realized I didn't want to study any more right then. I needed a break from that. And I was one of those fortunate people who--my parents had paid for my college education, so the money that I had made in working away those summers--I was always a big saver, and I had saved every bit of it--and actually worked on the Jersey Shore the summer after I graduated, and then I took that money and, uh, instead of going to law school I bought a one-way ticket to Europe, and I travelled over there for about--I think it was around fourteen or fifteen months.

Brooks: Wow.

Regan-Blake: Yeah.

Brooks: Were you by yourself?

Regan-Blake: I went over with a friend from college that I'm still in touch with, and, oddly enough, her name is Connie [Brooks laughs], which is not that usual of a name, especially in Europe. You know, Mary would have been one thing, or some other names, but, uh, no one believed that we were both named Connie. But, uh, we hitchhiked and travelled around out of a backpack. That's all I took over with me. And I had made a contact with someone, so there was a potential job in Germany. I had, you know, someone's name. We did go there. It was on an air force base outside of Frankfurt in a little city called Wiesbaden. And she and I both worked there. And she ended up meeting her future husband that she's still married to--he was in the air force. So, I don't remember how many months in, she knew she that was gonna be getting married and didn't want to do any more travelling. So, uh, she actually came back to the states and got married. And I continued travelling. I'd met people--other people--so almost all of my travel was with someone else, but not Connie. You know it was--there were several other people that I travelled with for the remaining time I was there.

Brooks: Mm-hmm. And how did your parents feel about you taking that year and--

[00:24:58]

Regan-Blake: You know, I still am so grateful to them. Um, you know, they never once--really in my whole life--never once did they say, Now we don't think you're going in the right direction, or, Wait a minute here, didn't we pay for all this college education--what are you doing travelling to Europe and using--and one way ticket--and becoming a storyteller. You know, they never said, What? [laughs] You know, You're quitting your library job as a storyteller to become a full-time storyteller? They were incredibly supportive of me, and my mom had a real sense of adventure--more than my dad, I think, at least for travel--adventure. For him, it was a big deal for them to go on their anniversary down to Daytona from Jacksonville. But mom loved to travel, and she had lots, um, very interesting friends. I think that's, uh--there's so many things that I admire about her--but that's one of the things. She had a friend that was from, um, Spain, and I think she had actually grown up in the Philippines, but she was Spanish and had family there. And the summer after I graduated from high school--and that woman's name was Connie [Brooks laughs], interesting--I hadn't thought of that together--but, um, Mom got on a ship with Connie and travelled over to Europe and ended up being over there for like six weeks. And about four weeks in she realized she hadn't learned much Spanish as--and all of Connie's family and friends were speaking Spanish--and she decided she would go off on her own. And this was in 1965. You know, for a fifty-something-year-old woman by herself, she travelled to Rome, and one of her hints to me was always stay in hotel that you can pronounce the name. And so, if she needed to get a taxi ride back, she would get a business card and she would be able to say the name. And she travelled, um, in Rome and Paris and--so she had that real sense of adventure. And I think in lots of ways, just her doing that probably led me to know and believe that I could do something like that too--something adventurous like that.

Brooks: I think a lot of people would assume that travelling--I know you were with people for a lot of the time, but--travelling alone and not having a plan, especially being a woman--like--I think a lot of people would be afraid of that, so I'm just wondering, like, if you did run into challenges and kind of how you dealt with them.

Regan-Blake: Almost never did I. And, you know, I think that I was, in general, I would say pretty aware. You know, I wasn't like zoned out where I didn't know that there was potential for something happening. At the same time [laughs], you're exactly right, you know. But I think back then, even though the dangers maybe existed for hitchhiking, um, it was a lot more common--especially in Europe. Um, people in Australia in particular, I remember--it was like a rite of passage, almost--you know, the vast majority of people coming out of high school or coming out of college would take a year off and travel in Europe. And, um--so that there was a hitchhiking going on. There was a real community, and--but you know, in those early days--so I wasn't travelling with a tent or anything--eventually after--in the first five months--after that, two other women friends and I bought a little, um, Volkswagen, and we actually got a tent. And so we would travel to campgrounds. But before that, a lot of times we were staying with people that had picked us up hitchhiking or we would--we did stay in youth hostels, and we didn't spend almost any money on things or on museums. It was not that--you know, the money that we had at that point--the money I had--it really went a long way. But to spend--I don't know however much it was--four dollars--to go into a museum--I would much rather use that to eat [laughs] for three days and keep travelling. So it was much more experience oriented.

[00:29:57]

But I only remember one bad experience. And, um, I had taken German in college, and I wasn't necessarily good at it, but I did know some German. And this was when my, uh, travelling partner, Connie, was still travelling with me, and I remember we were hitchhiking in picked a ride with a guy, and we were on the Autobahn, you know, which--I don't even think there were interstates, or not like that, you know. No speed limits. It was--it was really dicey, uh, it felt dicey--it felt a little scary. And, uh, he exposed himself, and, um, started masturbating. And that was--and, um, I remember Connie was sitting in the backseat, and I wanted to let her know that something was going on 'cause she could not see what was happening, and I told him right away that we needed to stop--I needed to take the next stop, and you need to pull off, and, uh, he did. I don't know if he took the very next one, but he did. But I remember being very calculated how I got out of the car because I was aware--even though, back then, I don't ever remember hearing--it wasn't like we were told those cautionary tales like so many people would be hearing today. Um so I'm not sure where this came from, but I remember stepping out almost kind of backwards where my feet--one foot was still in the car--and it wasn't four doors--it was two door, so I had to raise up that

seat that I was sitting on for Connie to get out. And I remember just looking at her and saying, "Get out now." And that was a frightening experience, but I don't remember that ever affecting me, thinking, Oh I'm not gonna put my thumb out again.

And I actually continued hitchhiking when I came back to the states. I was living in Atlanta--did not have a car--I was living with my sister, and I was hitchhiking until, uh--I remember someone picking me up that was in a Volkswagen van, and later I heard--I don't know if it was that day or that week--I heard something on the news about someone who had been picking up women hitchhiking and, uh, abusing them and how he was arrested. And I don't think that it was the same person that had picked me up, but the point of that interview that I heard on TV was that people sometimes think that because of the type of car it's okay. And that was exactly what I had thought, Oh it must be alright. And that was the last time that I hitchhiked, so I did learn my lesson. Most of my experiences in Europe were like the experiences I've had my whole life. You know, this, um, magical way of travelling and meeting what I think are really the best of humanity. And I felt like I was doing that when I was in Europe. I was often meeting people that were just, um, so welcoming and wouldn't take any money or wouldn't take anything to putting us up and feeding us and just were a delight and a wonderful addition to my life.

Phil: I'm sorry to interrupt, but it's starting to stick to the driveway. If it sticks to the driveway, you'll be spending the night here.

Brooks: Okay.

Regan-Blake: And this is Phil, Ellen.

Brooks: Hi Phil. [laughs] Nice to meet you.

Regan-Blake: So if you're--so it's totally up to you--but if--do you want to stop it or anything for a second?

Brooks: Yeah. Let's do that.

Brooks: Ok, so, uh, if you can tell me what places you visited in Europe on your adventure.

Regan-Blake: Well it was mostly in western Europe, and I did not make it to the Scandinavian countries but got into all the other countries and got as far east as Istanbul and almost got caught in Turkey but ended up being able to make our way down into, uh, Greece. And I think that's when I, you know--that's when it was probably getting close to when I was gonna be flying back home.

Brooks: And how did you decide you were ready to go back home?

Regan-Blake: I ran out of money [laughs]. You know, money went really far over there. Our American dollars, uh, were doing great at the time, but once you ran out of money you really couldn't work over there. It was very hard to get any kind of papers to be able to actually work, and so that was more the driving force rather than feeling like I had to get home. But, uh--but it was okay. You know, I'd had quite an adventure, so--

[00:35:07]

Brooks: And did you know what you were gonna do once you got back home?

Regan-Blake: I was gonna make enough money to go travelling again [laughter]. That was definitely the plan. I had friends--I'd made friends at one of the campgrounds, um, with a group of people--I think there were five guys--and they were, uh--what was called at the time--going over land to Australia. And that was from Greece they kept going east, east, east, east as far as they could--and I think it was maybe as far as Hong Kong is where they ended up--and then took a flight to Australia. And so they really wanted me to go with them, and I really wanted to go, but I didn't have the funds for it, um, and neither did my friends that I was with at the time. And so that was my dream--was to eventually go over land to Australia. And I didn't do quite the route that they did, but I did make to Australia a few years ago, so--

Brooks: Well that's good.

Regan-Blake: Yeah.

Brooks: Yeah, check that off. Um, and so you mentioned you were in Atlanta with your sister. Was that immediately after you got back?

Regan-Blake: Yes. So I got back to the States, and the only thing I had really done job-wise was waitress--those two summers in Colorado and one summer up on the Jersey Shore. So my sister graciously took me in, and--she and her roommate--and, uh, I got a job at The Regency, which--a hotel, still exists--and I think this, um, rotating restaurant on the top is still there as well. At the time, it was the tallest building in Atlanta, and it was quite extraordinary, you know, to take that elevator all the way up and then get off the elevator, and you rotated around Atlanta during your whole shift, and it was an interesting thing. You had to figure out ways to know when you came out of the kitchen to know where your table was. [Brooks laughs] But I, uh, enjoyed that and did that for, uh, about less than a year, I think. I'd started saving enough money--I felt like I was getting close to--or closer, anyway--to be able to just start travelling again. And for some reason, though, I decided to--I don't remember why--but I decided I was gonna travel in the United States. Let me see is that right--that was when I did that?

Um, no, so at this point--so I was still working at the hotel there, and my first cousin that--my mom's brother's family who lived up in Nashville--the ones that stayed in Tennessee--his daughter, Barbara Freeman--we had spent a lot of time riding horses down there in Florida in the summertimes making up all kinds of games and playing rodeo and such--we were good friends. She had gone to--gotten her master's in library science and was working at the Chattanooga Public Library. And she--I went up to visit her--Chattanooga's pretty close to Atlanta--I hadn't seen her since all this adventure I had been on. It had probably been two or three years. And as soon as we sat down, she was--she had a horse--she was living on about ten acres in a trailer--and we sat down and caught up with family and how our lives were, and then kind of the very next thing she did was say, "Connie, you know there is an opening at the library. We are gonna be hiring a storyteller, and I think you could do it." And I said, "Great! What is a storyteller?" And she told me about this job they had--she and the director of the library, Ms. Arnold--had written a federal grant--had applied for one--and it was specifically to bring the library and the library's, um, tools, and gifts, and jewels out to preschoolers that were in daycare centers. And this was in 1971--daycare centers themselves--that was a brand-new thing--and it was in low income neighborhoods that often had no access to libraries--maybe had no written materials in their homes. And, um, the focus of this program was gonna be on storytelling as a way to, uh, invite these children into the world of the library, and then let them check out books and take them home.

[00:40:06]

And it was the best of children's literature. So it wasn't the Golden Books [Little Golden Books] and the cheap books. It was the Caldecott Award-winning, hard back books. And I remember some of the naysayers said, Well what if that book gets lost, or they just decide not to bring it back? Our attitude was, Great, then they'll have a book in the home. 'Cause they got to take them home with them--these books. So, um--but on that very day that Barbara was telling me about it, she was so excited and so encouraging, and she said, "Well let me tell you a story," and she sat down and pulled out a picture book. I was like, Oh that looks--that's kind of cool--I think I could do that. And what appealed to me about that job was that it would look like a real job on resume, but I only had to commit to nine months because it was federally funded for nine months, and it would be more pay than I was getting at the hotel--at the restaurant. And so I went in and applied for the job, and I got it. And, um, I was really--it was a thrilling time to be involved in this program just as it was--you know, I think of it as having been in a bud, and so it was starting to blossom. Certainly, Barbara and Ms. Arnold had so many ideas of what they thought how it might be, but I was really able to help bring it to life.

And we bought lots of books. We bought a van, and, uh, we came up with the name MORE, M-O-R-E, and that stood for "Making Our Reading Enjoyable." And the tagline was, "Chattanooga Public Library is doing more." And we

travelled in this van, um, around town, and I loved it. I--within probably the first month or six weeks, I knew I was gonna have storytelling be a part of my life for the rest of my life. I just--I loved it. I loved that connection. You know, I often say--I teach a lot of storytelling these days and workshops and such--I always have done a lot of workshops--but sometimes I say that, as the storyteller, you have the best seat in the house, and to have that kind of circling energy going out from the story, kind of through those children and right back to me and circling right back to them, it was just--I just loved it. And I got to know these children 'cause I was seeing them once a week, so I went to a number of different daycare centers and would be able to tell stories to the three year olds and then go in the next room and tell stories to the four year olds. We had a lot of very creative ways of connecting with the children. Uh, we made name tags that were always a character out of one of the stories I was gonna be telling. So there was a staff. There was an assistant, and then there was a director of the program, and then my official title was storyteller. And, um, I got us a portable record player, and we would play classical music while they were looking through the books they wanted to choose, and it was just terrific. And, uh--and then we got closer to--she had me, from the very early days--within probably a month or so--Ms. Arnold had me going out to community groups to talk about this program. I didn't realize it at the time, but she had it in her mind about getting the city to fund it, and she wanted people to know about it. But for me it was an extra gift 'cause I got used to telling and being in front of an audience of adults as well as these children. So I would go to the Kiwanis Club, the Rotary, and the Association of University Women, and such and talk about the program--usually tell a story or two.

And then those nine months, you know, were coming to an end, and that's when I decided--I had saved lots of money--but rather than travelling to Australia at that point or going back to Europe. I decided to travel in the United States, so I, um, went back to New Orleans and then down to Texas--I had college friends--and I actually went to the Houston Public Library. And I remember walking in and saying--and talking to the children's librarian--and saying, "I'm a storyteller," and you know thinking, Maybe a major library like that would be interested, and they interviewed me, and we talked about--they didn't have a position for storyteller. But I remember that. You know, we kept in touch a little bit and they decided to--luckily for me--they decided to not go that route.

[00:45:12]

And then I kept travelling. Went out to Los Angeles. Visited some of the friends that I had travelled in Europe with. Came back through Colorado, and along about there is when my sister tracked me down--of course we didn't have cell phones or--and she didn't even necessarily know where I was, but somehow--I guess I was keeping in touch with her that I'd call her every few weeks or something--and she said I had gotten a letter, um, and I asked her to open it, and it was from the director of the library asking me to come back and be the director of this program the city had funded, um, MORE. And it is actually still going on now. So since

1971, next year will be fifty years that this program has been around. Just amazing. I'm so thrilled about it.

Um, but I was thrilled. There was no hesitation. So I came back to Chattanooga and started at the library again, but as the director of the program and had a couple of assistants with me. I still told stories, and then we hired somebody else to also do some of the storytelling. And, um, I ended up being there for another three and a half months--three and a half years. Yeah.

Brooks: Wow, okay [laughs]. Um, and so when you're doing the storytelling with MORE, uh, are you reading from a book or are you doing it like freeform stories?

Regan-Blake: Yes, so, um, I did--I used a lot of--we wanted to get the best of children's literature, so a lot of that is literary stories, and so like *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak and a lot of Ezra Jack Keats books--*Snowy Day* and such--so what I would do--and I really learned this from Barbara, my cousin--I would hold the book--and in the early days I used to teach how to do this to librarians and such that wanted to up their skills--but what I learned myself and utilized was always holding the book still, making sure at first that everyone could see, you know, having children sit flat on their bottoms, so they couldn't raise up and block the person behind 'em. And then it was--it wasn't like a told story that I do on stage now--but it was not me reading it, turn it around for the pictures, reading some more, turning it around. It had a much more telling feel to it. And then some of the stories I would tell them, "I'm gonna tell this. I want you to make the pictures in your mind, and then I'll show you the book." And so, then I did that with some of the stories as well.

Brooks: Mm-hm, neat.

Regan-Blake: Yeah.

Brooks: Yeah.

Regan-Blake: And told some traditional. I didn't get into a lot of traditional stories, um, but, you know, the key was--one of the goals was to connect the children with the books, so I always had some version. Like if I was telling, uh, *The Three Bears* or *The Three Little Pigs*, I would have some version of that story in a book so they could check that out afterwards. Yeah.

Brooks: Okay, um, just because we're in the time frame, I wanted to ask if you had anything to say about the Vietnam War? Um, because you would have been about the age that a lot of people might have been affected--well I mean I suppose everyone in the country was affected, but--

Regan-Blake: Yeah.

Brooks: Um, and it's--you know, if you don't have, you know, anything you think is significant to say, that's totally okay, but I think--

Regan-Blake: You know, I had--I remember that I had some friends that went, and, um, I was more--I would not--I don't remember ever, um, getting into, you know, kind of at some of the height of that was--I guess--was when I was in Europe, too. Uh, I do remember being involved in the Civil Rights Movement when I was in college, and--only once--but walking in a picket line kind of thing at one of the local bars. Um, but I don't remember--I would think just because of who I am, and who I was at that time, that I would not have been for that war. Um, but I don't have specific memories around it.

[00:49:44]

Brooks: Mm-hmm. I think it tends to be one of those things--it's like Woodstock--like, "Everyone was there, right?" Like no, not ev--you know--not everyone has the same experiences that we see on TV, um, and so just because, like, you're of a certain generation doesn't mean you necessarily were.

Regan-Blake: I will say, when Woodstock happened, um, I was up in New Jersey, and I did--

Brooks: Oh, there you go.

Regan-Blake: That's that summer I was working, and that's also--I believe that that's the same summer--I know that--I'm pretty sure it was the same--that was the summer that, um, a human first walked on the moon. And I remember watching that in this place where all the waitresses and waiters and stuff were living and watching that on some little TV. And I have a vague memory of hearing of Woodstock, [Brooks laughs] but I did not go, unfortunately, or maybe fortunately.

Brooks: Yeah.

Regan-Blake: [laughs] My life might have been different.

Brooks: Sure [laughs]. Yes that would have been another story probably.

Regan-Blake: Uh-huh.

Brooks: Um, so three and a half years with MORE, um, as the director, and then what was next?

Regan-Blake: Then, um--I had started during that time--I was telling at some festivals there in Chattanooga, and I remember, um, a festival at Tusculum, which is a small college that's kind of known for its connections to the folk music world. It's over in Greeneville, Tennessee. They had a folk festival and had invited me to tell there--oh, and, um, also during that time, I heard--I'd been back at the library, um,

for a little bit--I've never figured that out as far as how many months--but I was there in '71 until end of '72, then I must have come back in late '72, and in, uh, '70--yeah, so, I had gone to a music festival--I loved--I was introduced to folk music--and I went to a music festival in east Tennessee, and they had a lot of crafts people there. It was out in the mountains--beautiful setting for it--and I loved the banjo music--fiddle--and I remember thinking, Boy, I would love to have this life. And I thought, Gah, I wonder if I could learn to make candles and maybe have one of these booths that people had set up and such, and, um, the people that had put on that festival--I'm trying to remember the name of it right now--it'll maybe come to me in a second--um, it had been a big event. There were thousands of people there. I met Sparky Rucker who is still a East Tennessee guitar player, and he tells stories as well. Met a few other people that I've continued friendships with, but, um, the people that ran that festival--something happened, either about the space or something--they decided they were gonna continue the festival on their own property. And somehow--there was no email--but somehow, they had gotten our names and addresses--or somehow I found out that they were looking for volunteers to come and, um, help build a stage and build steps up the mountain, and they were gonna be having a festival there. Well, right before that happened, a friend of mine had heard about the National Storytelling Festival--the very first one, um--it was in 1973, and she had written me and said, "Do you know about this?," and sent me the name and address of the person that was putting on the festival, and I wrote him and said, "I'm a storyteller in Chattanooga," and he wrote back, and it was Jimmy Neil Smith, and he said, "Oh I'd love"--you know--"please come, and if we have time, we'll put you on the stage." And so I went up for that festival, and, um, they actually had Jerry Clower--I don't know if you've ever heard of him--but he was very famous kind of in the Grand Ole Opry. He was a comedian and a humorist and told about Mississippi and the screen door slamming--you know--somebody yelling, "Charles, get in," you know, and he did all the very funny kinds of things. He was real popular--little bit of an obnoxious guy--but real popular. And they had invited him for a Saturday evening event, and Barbara went with me, and we got up there only caught a little bit, and it was Ralph Stanley, you know, and his band was there. And it was in a great big high school auditorium filled to the brim, and, uh, everybody was, you know, having a good time and stuff. We actually had made several stops on our way up, so we didn't catch much of Jerry Clower.

[00:55:16]

But when we got there--Barbara had a little yellow pickup truck--one of those little toy trucks, and uh, we had brought our sleeping bags, but we didn't have any place to stay, and I--as everybody was leaving, these thousands of people--maybe two thousand people or something--maybe not quite that many, but big crowd--as we were leaving, uh, I asked some people, "Anybody know Jimmy Neil Smith?" And I found him and said, "I'm Connie the storyteller, and uh, we need a place to stay," and he said, "Oh," and he said, "Carolyn," and just then there was a woman walking by and she had this cape--a dark green cape--and Jimmy Neil said to her,

"Carolyn, these two women need a place to stay tonight," and she said, "Follow me," and kind of twirled that cape, and I remember going out into that parking lot with just hundreds of cars, but somehow we managed to follow her, and, um, we became good friends. So the next, uh, day we chatted a lot and stuff, so we stayed the night with her, and the next day, was what, to me, was to be the beginning of this revival of storytelling. And that was a flatbed truck they had pulled in to Jonesborough--downtown--had hay bales on it, and they put out about thirty-five or forty chairs--folding chairs--closed a little half-block section, and they had some bluegrass--a bluegrass band--and some politicians, and they had Ray Hicks, the man that I had mentioned to you that had become such a huge influence in my life and still is. He had come down from the mountains, and he had told stories, and his wife was there. And they actually asked if anyone else wanted to tell a story, and I raised my hand and went on stage, and Barbara raised her hand and went on stage. And then afterwards, Ray and Rosa were staying with Carolyn, and so we went over there. I've actually got photographs of that day, uh, listening to Ray telling Carolyn--she had a huge old house and her library--and that began that friendship that went on for thirty years--deep, family kind of friendship with the Hicks and with Carolyn. So that was in 1973, so it was, um, in '7--that've been in '73 'cause that was the first festival--then the following year, this group that had put on the folk music festival--I got a letter that anybody wanted could come help, so I went up to help--took a week's vacation--and sitting around the fire, I was telling stories and stuff, and the festival was gonna be that weekend.

And since I was so close to Jonesborough, I decided to ride on over to Jonesborough to see Carolyn, and I had written her. When I got there to her house--she was a very dramatic woman--she remained a long-time friend--she's passed away now--but when I pulled up into her driveway--I hadn't even gotten into the house, I just got out of the car--and she said, "Oh, come with me," and we went right to her car, and she took me to downtown Jonesborough--tiny little place there--and, um, she took me to the kitchen entrance of a brand-new restaurant that had opened in a church called the Parson's Stable. And she opened the door to that kitchen entrance, and she said, "Jimmy Neil, here's your storyteller," [Brooks laughs] and she closed the door. Now I'd met Jimmy Neil very briefly, you know, that October before, and this was in--it would have been in, uh, September of the next year, and it turned out Jimmy Neil was looking for a children's storyteller for the second national festival, which was coming up in a month.

[00:59:40]

And he and I really bonded that night. We sat up until, like, the wee hours talking--did a little bit of clog dancing--and talking stories, and he actually gave me a copy of a story that, uh, someone had written down and sent to him that became a seminal story--it's on one of my recordings--and it became one of those stories that let folk music festivals know storytelling was for adults. It's a very powerful story, but he gave it to me that night. I ended up contacting the woman--Eliza Seaman--and ended up meeting her and telling that story. But--so he invited me to

come back. So then I came back to the second national festival in 1974, and I said, "You know, my cousin tells stories, too," so she came and the next year she told, and that's when--during that time is when--she and I--I really decided that I wanted to do storytelling full-time, and Barbara was up for it, too. So we loved our library jobs, but it was during those months that, uh, we decided we needed to quit. You know we both went to Mrs. Arnold, and we said, "We need to go." She gave us her blessing and has continued being a dear friend, and, uh, we had no idea that we could make a living telling stories, um, but we both thought--we had both waitressed--we actually considered, you know--'cause we knew we wanted to travel and do this and collect stories--tell stories where we could. We thought about--maybe we would learn to drive the semis and could be partners and could swap off on who drove and then be able to go places and tell stories. And we had several ideas as we started off, but we quit at same--we used that same little yellow truck, but put a little topper on it, and we lived out of that then for three years, and we left the library in, um, July 1, 1975, and that began our freelance professional storyteller career.

Brooks: Wow. Um, and just for the record, what was Carolyn's last name?

Regan-Blake: Uh Car--I know several Carolyn's and their--Moore. Carolyn Moore. Yeah.

Brooks: Okay, um, great. Um, so hmm, where should we go from here? Where did you end up travelling to?

Regan-Blake: Well we, um, travelled first, um--so we got this--you know, we had the camper on the back of it, and uh, a friend of Barbara's and Barbara kind of put in a floor back there, but I always like to emphasize: it really was a little small thing [laughter]. This was--actually a friend of mine used to say, when she heard--now I used to refer to it as a camper--and she went, "Now Connie, that wasn't a camper"--she saw a picture--she said, "That's a topper." So, um, but we had--we sold everything that we had and travelled with very little. And we had tickets--I had heard through this Cosby--is the place in Tennessee that had that festival that kept on for many years--and that year, actually, that I had gone up to Carolyn's and ended up getting hired for the next festival--when I came back for the weekend festival, um, the people--Lee and Jean Schilling--put me on stage that weekend for the first festival that was gonna be up at their house on their land. And John McCutcheon was there. I don't know if you've ever heard of him, but he's probably one of the most well-known, and certainly beloved, folk music performers. He's been doing it for over fifty years now. He was making his living doing it then, and I remember thinking--this was still when I was at the library--thinking, Gah wouldn't that be the coolest thing, to be able to do this like John is doing it. And there was someone that--she told me this story--she said, um--she was out in the audience--she had been recording John and the other performers, and she said--when they announced--and I said, "My partner Barbara was coming up, could she tell too," and they said, Oh yeah. So but they introduced me first, and this woman told me later, she said, "When they introduced storytellers"--that there was gonna

be a storyteller--she said, "I turned off my recorder," and she said, "As soon as you started, I turned it back on," she said, "So I missed the first four words."

[01:04:49]

She knew someone that ran the Fiddler's Grove Festival, which is one that's gone on for seventy or eighty years over in, uh--outside of Statesville, uh, North Carolina, here. So we were invited to tell there the next year. So, so much happened built on each other, but that very first year after we left the library, we had tickets to the Fox Hollow Folk Music Festival, which was in upstate New York outside of Albany. Well-known--and you know there was a whole--I guess there still is, in some ways--but back then there was this whole network of folk music festivals, and some singer-songwriters, some more traditional performers, Utah Phillips was really, um, there a lot at a lot of them. Pete Seeger, and his half-brother Mike Seeger, was at a lot of these events. Highwoods String Band--lots of names that you would hear over and over and--but no storytelling except for one humorist named Marshall Dodge, who was from up in New England.

But we had tickets to go to the Fox Hollow Festival, and so we had--the people--some of the people that had gathered in Cosby, Tennessee had told me about this festival, so I'd looked it up and we decided to go there--that was kind of our first place. And we went to the first evening's event, and then it started, uh--we were camped at the Little Hoosic Campground near the Little Hoosic River, and the very first night we were there, early the next morning, about 5am, we had a knock on our little camper window, and they said, "You gotta move your truck here, the river's rising," and for everyone that was in that campground, they sent 'em all over to camp where the performers were camping for the folk--for the Fox Hollow Festival. And so we set up our little camper--we had a roll-out canopy that had two poles so we could sit outside even if it was raining--and as we were going to different performances, there were--I don't remember how many for sure, but it was a few thousand people, maybe a little more--could have been five thousand people at this festival--and, um, as we were going around listening to different performers during the day, we were telling people, "We're gonna be telling some stories around a campfire tonight, we're over there where the performers are, you know." And so we had invited people to come, and so we told stories that night. And, uh, Sandy Paton--who, um, owned Folk Legacy Recording up in Connecticut--he came with his wife and afterwards said, "I'm gonna be doing some things with Gordon Bok"--who was another very famous singer-songwriter at the time. He was at a lot of these festivals and events. He said, uh, "I'm doing a performance with Gordon next week at the Connecticut Folk Festival. If y'all come, I'll put you on stage if I have time." And so we went--'cause we didn't any place else to go. We didn't have any plan. We did think that we might--it was 1975 and we thought that we might learn some Revolution stories, 'cause, you know, the anniversary was coming up, um, for 1776. And I remember we stopped on our way from Tennessee up to Albany area--we stopped in New Jersey and went into a library and got some Paul Revere books and copied

a few stories and thought maybe we'll tell at malls or shopping centers or something like that. And so we went up, went the next week to the Connecticut folktelling--uh, Festival--and, um, he put us on stage, and afterwards, the way we used to tell it, we didn't even barely get off the stage before people were up to us.

One woman asked us, "I can pay you fifty dollars if you'll come to my daycare center tomorrow and tell stories." Somebody else then heard us during that time. Bob Zentz, who ran a festival in, um--Old Dominion Folk Festival--outside of Norfolk, Virginia--and he actually heard us in a parking lot telling some stories to some kids, he said, "That's my son's favorite story. If you'll tell it, I'll hire you to come down." He ended up hiring us to teach an eight-week class in storytelling at the college there--a continuing education. Somebody else heard us during that time and she said, "My sister is a librarian in Ohio," and that person ended up hiring us to come out to Ohio and do some workshops, and, uh, do performances. And so one job led to five or six. And every time in this folk world, you know, storytelling was a brand-new thing--our type of storytelling was a brand-new thing--but they really embraced it. It was--you know, there might have been some storytelling happening before, but it was mostly in children's tents. Some of the larger festivals had an area that would be just for children. And timing was right. You know, we had some stories that were really meant for adults, and right away they just put us on main stage. So we got a lot of exposure. And always in the audience there would be teachers and librarians, and they would come up to us afterwards, and we really had it much better than a lot of the folk performers, who had to go from coffeehouse to festival to coffeehouse, which was usually weekend work. But we often could be doing schools and then do the coffeehouse that weekend. So we ended up living out of that truck for three years. And touring and travelling and performing.

[01:11:16]

Brooks: Wow. And how did it work between the two of you on stage?

Regan-Blake: So we developed--we had seen a group out of, um, Kentucky. Let's see if I can remember the name of the city. It's been a long time since I thought about that. But they were called the Roadside Theater, and they had a little bit more of a theatrical feeling, but when I was still at the library, I had heard them. Uh, they actually had a comp--they--around that, had developed a company called AppalShop, and they did, um, this Roadside Theater, which told traditional mountain stories, and there were four or five of them that would kind of tell and act it out. And it was not straight theater, but it wasn't also straight storytelling. It was somewhere in between. But we were really inspired by that, and I think, once I started looking back on it--I don't know that I was aware at the time--but once, you know, through people asking or whatever, I realized that was probably our first inspiration to do what we call tandem storytelling. So that was where both of us--we would have two mics on stage, um. For about a third of the stories we did in tandem, where we would swap lines back and forth and then say certain lines

together, and then go back to back and forth. And that would be a tandem story, and then, say, I would sit down, and Barbara would tell a solo story, and then I would tell a solo story, and then we'd do another tandem. So our sets were kind of a combination of each of us, um, telling a story and then doing these, what we call, tandem stories.

Brooks: And--and you mentioned--and we've talked a little bit before, and I'm not sure this is the perfect time to discuss--but, speaking of kind of, like, the revival of storytelling, and you mentioned, like, your style of storytelling being kind of new, what, if anything, did you kind of know about the history of storytelling, I guess, and, like, how it's--the trends of it--have kind of gone up and down, or--yeah, I'm just kind of curious about like how you understood yourself in that moment in time in terms of storytelling?

Regan-Blake: Mm-hmm. Well, I think, um, you know, traditionally and historically we humans have always told and listened to stories. It's a part of who we are. And so--for the most part though--by the time the fifties--forties and fifties--when radio became really popular and then television and then that started being in a lot of homes, a lot of people turned away from their stories, and--not everyone, but a lot of people did. It used to be more of an integral part of everyone's family 'cause that's what you did at night. You gathered around and--either your immediate family or your extended family--and you played music, and you told stories. And that was certainly going on in the mountains. That's--Ray Hicks was a part of that. It was a tradition in his family, so it had been passed along. His grandfather and grandmother had both told stories some, and so, um, that was a part of who he was growing up.

[01:14:52]

For Barbara and I, you know, we were coming out of the literary world more. Even though there'd been stories told--and my dad told some traditional stories--I didn't realize they were traditional stories, actually. He had three main ones that he told us kids, and it was only as a storyteller that I came upon all three of those in collections of stories and realized he's been telling me traditional stories. But mostly it was family stories that I was exposed to. But this whole idea of people telling stories like Ray was--even though it was vibrant in some communities--for the most part it was really fading. And so what had happened, when you mentioned the word storytelling, most people thought of only for children. And still today that stereotype is there. Oftentimes, if someone--you know, if I'm filling out a form or something and it asks for my occupation, or I'm at a chamber event and--a lot of people know about it, but a lot of other people say, Oh I bet my kids would love that [Brooks laughs],--and they would--but not realizing that it's much broader than that. But what happened, uh, with this storytelling festival--even though Jimmy Neil had had Jerry Clower, who was a different kind of thing--he was more like a Minnie Pearl, if you've heard of her from the Grand Ole Opry--you know, this real humor, a real heavy accent--I think he might have been

from Mississippi, so it wasn't a false accent, but it was playing on stereotypes a lot. And, um--but what Jimmy Neil realized is that he loved what happened on that Sunday. Even though there were thirty-five people as opposed to a thousand or two, that's--for him--where that magic happened--when Ray got up on stage. And so that's what he wanted to focus on, so at the second national storytelling--he started calling it National Storytelling Festival--the very first one, um, which was quite brazen in some ways [Brooks laughs], but it was the only festival in the United States that was geared towards storytelling, so it was the very first that that was the full focus. Um, and, um, at the second then I was there as a featured and Kathryn Windham, who told kind of from a journalist's point of view at first, telling ghost stories--things she had gone out and interviewed people. She was one of the early female editors at a newspaper in Alabama. She was from Selma, Alabama. She continued in the storytelling world and started telling personal experience stories and has passed away now but was--is--an incredibly beloved storyteller. She was at that second one.

But other than that pe--you know--people might have been telling at the children's schools, but people weren't out there kind of telling stories. So, as we started doing this and the folk music world embraced us, then more and more people started seeing us. And some of those people that started seeing us were people who wanted to do this--that saw this model and realized, Oh, I can do that. And also, uh, in 1974, before I left the library, is when the National Storytelling Association started, and I was asked to be on the Board of Directors, and I was so passionate about the organization and about this festival that I never performed without inviting people to come to Jonesborough, Tennessee the first full weekend in October, and I always knew exactly if that was October 4th, 5th, and 6th, coming up in 1976. So every time when Barbara and I performed, whether it was at a public library in Philadelphia or a festival, you know, in the Midwest, I was always mentioning that and inviting people to come. And in those early years we grew from that thirty-five or forty people to a hundred, to two hundred, to five hundred, and I feel like if polls had been taken, probably the vast majority of people that heard about it heard about it through Barbara and I. And that's what I was mentioning--and I was the one that was, um--Barbara did so much for storytelling, and still does--but I was--I'm just more focused in a different kind of way than Barbara is. And, um--so I just made it a point to always announce and invite and tell people about the festival and the organization and invite them to join and support storytelling. And when people would come to that festival, what they wanted to do was go home and start a festival.

[01:20:06]

And that happened all over the United States. And there's storytelling festivals in every single state in the Union--except for I think two. There's a couple out--I can't remember now where they were--whether it was Montana that doesn't have one, or--so there's a couple that might not, but a lot them--you know, California had probably six or eight or ten, and North Carolina has--and that--it varies, and it

goes, you know, up and down, but in the early days, there were not--except for the national--so we depended greatly on these folk music festivals, and, like I said, they embraced us, and so did the Canadian ones. So we were on main stage up at Winnipeg Folk Festival and out at Vancouver Folk Festival, and there was a big Toronto--so everywhere we were going I had, um, kind of--we didn't really call it this at the time, but again, looking back on it, I was really artistic director of the festival because I was out there beating the bushes trying to get storytellers--'cause today they are everywhere. There are hundreds or maybe thousands, you know, and everyone wants to tell at that National Storytelling Festival, which is still going on. This will be the forty--uh, let's see is it the forty-seventh or forty-eighth--year coming up, so it was 1973 and twenty is seventeen, and you add one, so it's eighteen, so it'll be the forty-eighth in October, and I'm tickled to say that I have a unique honor, um, of being on stage at all forty-seven so far. So I'm the only one, and as I mentioned, when they asked for volunteers I told at the first one and then was featured at the second and third and probably the fourth and then have always either been an emcee or been featured at every year, so I've always been on stage at all of 'em.

But while I was out there and playing this role as, um, artistic director, I was always looking for storytellers. 'Cause Jimmy Neil was that anchor. He was the one that was pulling the town behind all of this. He was the one making all the arrangements--really creating the festival and have it happen, but, uh, I was the main one that was out there kind of finding and hearing storytellers and inviting them to come to that festival. And Jimmy Neil certainly did some of that too, but it was broadening it out. It was spreading it out and spreading out the word of lots of people that wanted to become storytellers.

Brooks: And what was the name, uh--did you have a name for your act, you and Barbara?

Regan-Blake: Yes, um--

Brooks: Do you call it an act?

Regan-Blake: Um, not [Brooks laughs] --we didn't use that word. We used duo. Uh, yeah. Um, 'cause we always made that distinction that we weren't acting.

Brooks: Right.

Regan-Blake: You know, and we--the very first festival--that first festival that--after Fox Hollow--we went the next week to the Connecticut Folk Festival, and the person that ran the Connecticut Folk Festival--he saw us when Sandy Paton invited us on stage--and he loved what we were doing, and he ran a coffeehouse, so he invited us to tell stories at that coffeehouse coming up either the next week or the week after that. And he had lots of folk musicians travelling in and out of Hartford there, and he'd always put 'em up, so we were staying there with him. And he--his day job was at a copy center, and he said, "You guys need a flyer. You need"--and

so he said, "You need a name." And I remember there was somebody else--another folk musician--I remember seeing her--I can picture her right now, but I don't remember her name--but she's the one that came up with "The Folktellers." Because it was different than the storytellers, and it had a different feel. It was more, oh, possibly for adults. And we loved it. And we, um--let's see what was--Domler. Bill Domler was the person who ran that festival [the Connecticut Folk Festival] and the coffeehouse, and the copy shop. And he got someone to take some photos of us, and, um, he wrote a lot of the copy, and he called Sandy Paton, who was--as I mentioned, he had started and owned Folk-Legacy Records--and he was really big time in the folk world. It was a big deal to be on that label, and he gave us a quote. And Sandy and his wife Caroline had been down to the mountains, um, and recorded Ray in the sixties, you know way before the storytelling festival, and had recorded other storytellers in these mountains. So our--we knew some of the same people and that ended up happening over and over through the years, too.

[01:25:32]

Brooks: Um, so three years on the road, uh, in the same pickup?

Regan-Blake: Yes.

Brooks: Um, and--

Regan-Blake: And often staying, you know--we could sleep in the back. We had yoga mats, and we had little hangings on the--you know, we each had our own--we had a line kind of drawn of whose side, and we had a little storage area for a small suitcase, and, uh, we had a area underneath the wooden bed that we kept a two-burner gas stove. And we had--we put up wall art on the ceiling. We each had our own little picture up there--uh, artistic picture. But, um, mostly we stayed with those librarians and teachers and festival people that hired us. But it was a huge advantage--we could have never have done this staying in motels--and it was a huge advantage having this place to sleep, so it wasn't like, Oh we have to find somebody that we can stay with, or, We're gonna have to pay these big bucks to stay in a motel. We knew we always could stay in the back of the truck. And so we did some time, but, for the majority of the time, we would stay with the people that hired us. We did a lot of work up on Long Island. Somebody hired--had seen us at a festival somewhere in New England--hired us to come and do a workshop, so we ended up just--you know, we kept going back to New England 'cause we would do all their libraries, all their schools, and, um, a lot of our work in the early days was up in New England. And then we had done that thing in, uh, Norfolk, Virginia that I'd mentioned at Old Dominion University. We kept going back there, so we would travel there, and then when it got cold--when it started for the winter, we would head down towards Florida, and then we had lots of contacts everywhere. And my dear sister--still living in Atlanta--she let us give her address, so that's what we put on our business card, and--uh, Lindbergh Drive,

Atlanta, Georgia--and we put that on, um, that flyer that our friend Bill made up for us. And, um, we would hand those out and then people--'cause you didn't really--you weren't really calling. I mean there was no way to call. So it was letters of people asking us to come out to Ohio or to, uh, Long Island. And so every week or so I would call my sister, and she will have massed whatever mail, and I'd say, "Well we're gonna be up in Vermont in Brattleboro in three weeks," and--'cause we'd had a job up at the coffee house, that was a real popular one actually--and so she would send an envelope filled with those letters to our names in care of general postmaster of Brattleboro, Vermont. And we'd get up there, walk into the post office, "Can we have our mail, please?" I remember doing that once in Philadelphia, and the downtown post office is magnificent. You feel like you're in Greece. It's a huge marble kind of feeling, and you go up all these steps, and we walked right into the post office and said, "Could we have our mail, please, for The Folktellers?" And he brought out a huge envelope, and we went and sat on the steps and, "Oh here's a letter from Florida. We got a job down there for January." You know, or whatever. So that's how--and then we would call if needed. We tried to most of it, um, through the mail and arrange our bookings and such, but if we needed to, we would, uh, call these places.

Brooks: Wow. And, uh, what happened after the three years?

[01:29:38]

Regan-Blake: So during those three years we were kind of on the lookout for where we might settle down, and we narrowed it down--we loved Brattleboro--and we thought about, actually, about staying there--we had spent a lot of time in a little town in West Virginia called Elkins. Um, there's a univers--a college--there, Elkins College--I think it's college, not university. But they have something called the Augusta Heritage Festival, and all summer long they teach, uh, traditional arts. So you can go there and learn the banjo. You can learn quilting. And we ended up teaching storytelling there, so we would oft--and they had big festival. You know, a couple of thousand people at a big auditorium, and so we would often perform at that. And so, we loved Elkins. We had a lot of friends there, and then we also had dear friends here in, um, Asheville. And two of the friends, uh, that influenced us picking Asheville were David Holt, who is really well-known in the folk music world as well--he also tells stories, and he has a long-running--now--PBS series where he introduces and--traditional and folk musicians to the greater world kind of thing--and so he and his wife Jenny lived here in Asheville. So as we were playing with that, out of those three places, Asheville had the biggest airport even though it's relatively small, and both Elkins and Brattleboro had real severe winters.

So we picked Asheville and decided to come here, and we've both been here ever since. We were partners--storytelling partners--for twenty years. So from 1975 until '95, and as I like to tell people, we're still first cousins [Brooks laughs]. and one of the images I have is that we opened doors for each other in 1995 to go on

different paths. Our lives just went in different directions, and, uh, it was a scary thing at first. I had almost never been on the stage by myself, and it was--it was an interesting process, but it's been a terrific blessing for me. I loved my time with Barbara, and, um, what we did, you know, the inroads that we made in this world and the experiences, and the friends, and the, you know, pulling off the side of the road 'cause we were laughing so hard we thought we were gonna have an accident, and we had lots of good times. But we also went in very different directions politically and our outlook on life, and, um, so it was a difficult decision for me to make, but I knew I could no longer continue being her storytelling partner. So we, uh, made that decision in '95, and now I've been telling stories twenty-five years since that time--uh, full time--'cause next year it'll be fifty years, uh, total, since I was hired as a storyteller, and as I like to say, it's been my only "for-real" job. So I waitressed before then, which is for-real, but it was more of a summer thing for me. So this has been the whole way that I've made my living.

Brooks: Yeah, and how did you decide back in--I guess it would have been--'78, '79 that you were--

Regan-Blake: Yes, '78.

Brooks: --that you were--wanted to get like a permanent--more permanent--location?

Regan-Blake: Well, you know, a lot of times when people heard that we'd been travelling all that time, or after we'd been travelling a year or two, or later, looking back on it they'd say, Gosh, travelling for three years? It didn't feel like a chore--it wasn't--'cause we just were meeting the coolest people, and there were definitely times when it was raining and we had to get out and, uh, call someone to make sure we had directions, 'cause we didn't have any Google Maps, and so there were some drawbacks. But in general, we loved it. But there just came a time when it was very clear to both of us: it's time to put down some roots and travel out from a place. We knew that we were gonna continue travelling, but we were both very clear on it, and it wasn't like we did the other thing to where we hated it or anything like that. The timing was just kind of perfect. It was like that part came to a little bit of a close, and then we, uh, settled here in Asheville.

Brooks: Mm-hm. So this was kind of your home base, but you continued to go out travelling around the country?

[01:34:28]

Regan-Blake: That's right, and, uh, we actually, uh, started flying a lot more during that time, and it was--American Airlines, back then, used to have something--you could pay one price for three weeks and travel anywhere in the United States. So we planned our tours for three weeks and we would fly, you know, from Asheville down to Houston, from Houston up to Cincinnati, from Cincinnati out to Long Island,

maybe back to Texas, and then--so we were gone for long stretches, but then we got to come home. And we lived in different places, so we had some privacy in that way, you know. Barbara lived in, uh, Hanger Hall, which a lot of people here in Asheville know about--but that's Howard Hanger, who was a jazz musician, and I don't think he plays much anymore, but he became a minister for a church called Jubilee--that's one of the most popular and well-respected churches that aren't straight denominational here in, um, Asheville. But he had a place called--that he called--Hanger Hall--an old house that was filled with creative people, so people rented rooms. And that's what Barbara loved. She loved all that action, loved those people. I found a little cottage at the end of the dirt road--so it was paved, then dirt, then gravel, then a little dirt driveway up to my place on forty acres, and, uh, I lived out there from--I think I lived in town for just a few months--and I lived out there until Phil and I built the house that we're in right now, and we moved into town. But that's where I lived, and I didn't meet Phil until a few years after we moved to Asheville.

And, um, so we travelled out from Asheville--sometimes in a vehicle. We ended up getting another truck and put that same topper on it. A friend of Barbara's was driving the yellow truck, and as we like to say--"Da Putt" is what we called the truck. It was a Datsun, which is the company name before Nissan, so it was a Datsun pickup truck, so it was Da Putt. Da Putt was in lots of magazines and articles and in lots of interviews in those early days, but we liked to say--Phil was the ba--Phil--I don't remember his last name, but Barbara's sweetheart at the time--was driving Da Putt, and we liked to say that Da Putt threw itself in front an oncoming car to save Phil from an accident. And so, we ended up getting another truck and travelling, but mostly by then we were flying. And we've both lived in Asheville ever since.

Brooks: Oh. And how did you meet your husband?

Regan-Blake: So we had--Barbara and I--had performed at the local university, UNC at Asheville. Um, there was a fundraiser for an arts journal, and it was a day-long fundraiser, and we loved the journal--we loved what they were doing for the arts and for Asheville--so we volunteered our time. And we told, uh, that morning--and they were having things going on all day long--they had a stage where people were performing all day long--and, um, a friend of Phil's was dating the guy named Howard that I just mentioned, and Howard was playing--his jazz band--was playing that night. And that friend worked at the same restaurant where Phil worked, and so she called Phil up and said, "You know, Howard's performing tonight, and I'm gonna go over at UNCA. Why don't you go and sit with me?" And so, luckily, he said yes. And Barbara and I knew Beth because of Hanger Hall--Barbara was still living there--and so, uh, after we'd performed and watched a few other performances, we saw Beth sitting on the grass over with this guy, and I--we--went over, and that's when I met Phil. And we ended up dancing--there was a reggae band that came on after Howard--and ended up dancing and definitely had a gleam in our eyes for each other. And we all went over to

Howard's afterwards, and, um, had a party, and then afterwards, Phil walked me out to my car, and he took out on of--by then he was, uh--he had started working at a car dealership--he wasn't at the restaurant any longer with Beth, but, um--he walked me out the car, and he pulled out one of his business cards, and he wrote my phone number "6" "6" "7" "3" "2" "5"--is that--no--he wrote down the number, and we actually put that card in the back of our wedding album. I kept that all those years. Um, but, um, we didn't really kind of start going steady, but he asked me out that night for a few days later, and, um, that unfolded in wonderful ways, and we've been together ever since 1981.

[01:40:09]

Brooks: Wow.

Regan-Blake: Yeah.

Brooks: That's great.

Regan-Blake: Yeah.

Brooks: Um, so what else--and it's a big chunk of time, but I'm just wondering, um, about that twenty years from '75 to '95--other significant things that you might want to touch on?

Regan-Blake: Um, so we did some of our first performing outside the United States during that time. Uh, we went over to Europe--did some kind of conference in France, I think--and told stories at some of the schools there. We also were invited--somehow some people--the people involved in the, uh, Department of Defense schools heard about us--and they asked to come over to Asia to tell stories over there, and they wanted us to go to, um, Japan, and Korea, and to the Philippines, and--but it was a long trip, and by then I had met Phil, and I wasn't wanting to go on quite so long of trips, so they ended up bringing us over at three different times. And that was really extraordinary 'cause we got to do sightseeing. We also got to tell--while we were in Japan, there was a Japanese author--children's book author--that heard we were coming over, and so he hired us--after we were finished with the dependent schools on the bases--he hired us to, uh, tell stories in a few different performance places, and, uh, did some workshops. So all of that--you know, I had done a lot of travelling, but travelling as a storyteller was really very exciting, um. We were on *All Things Considered* back in the seventies.

Brooks: Cool.

Regan-Blake: Yeah, we didn't even know about it, it wasn't even here in--or we'd never heard--practically we'd never heard of NPR [National Public Radio], I don't think. Uh, and a man named Steve Wrath [??] had invited us to be on his show in Washington DC--had seen us at some festival--and we went and did--he did a

long interview with us. And, um, he really enjoyed it, and we thoroughly enjoyed it, and then he invited us to come back the next time we were gonna be through DC. He said, "I'd love to have you come back and do another hour." And I remember--so we got to hear that first time, you know and that was kind of fun--we were interviewed by a lot of people, actually, but that was fun to be on the radio, and we had, by then, started hearing more about NPR. We didn't know until decades that it was actually *All Things Considered*--was the show that we were on. But he invited to come back, and he was recording it ahead of time, and it was gonna be running later, and so he asked a couple of questions, and he came to a point, and he said, "I'm gonna stop for just a second." So he turned the mics off, and he said, "Barbara, what's happened to your voice?" And, uh, he said, "You don't sound like yourself." And she said, "Well Steve, I didn't like it how I sounded so country, so I wanted to sound different this time," [both laugh] he said, "Barbara, the reason we have you on is because you sound country," [Brooks laughs] so he clicked the microphones back on [laughs], and we continued, and she went back to being who she was.

But, um, we had--we did things with the New York Public Library. Augusta Baker--who is an icon in the library storytelling world--she was one of the real pioneers who, uh, trained children's librarians to be storytellers. And she had a very strict way of doing it. Some of the people that were interested in it were coming from the theatrical world, and she did not want theatrics. You were not to use your hands. Back then--this was back in the--probably--I don't know for sure, but it could have been--in the fifties and sixties when she was really, uh, having a huge influence in the library world as far as stories still being told to children, and she had a whole ritual that they would--today you wouldn't be able to do this--but she would light a--each storyteller would light a candle.

[01:44:47]

And I was so, um, taken with her openness. You know, we were dressed in--we had jeans and flannel shirts and grosgrain lace-up boots--you know, Barbara sometimes wore bib overalls. We weren't trying to do a country act, that's kind of more who were, and that's what we were comfortable in; that's what we did at the festivals and such. And Augusta was so--you know because we were coming from the library world--she was one of our heroes. And, um, so was Anne Izard who had done a film on this library storytelling, and we got to meet both of them, so they were both like our heroes, but we didn't know what Augusta would think of us. You know, here we were swapping lines back and forth, and we were not acting things like a theatrical troupe would. We still feel--and I feel this today--very connected, but we were performance storytellers. We were not Ray Hicks sitting on the front porch, but we also were not acting it out. And, uh--but still we didn't know. But she embraced us and had us come--and that was thrilling thing--come and do workshops for her librarians in New York City and then to, you know, all over Staten Island and all the different boroughs and then to do performances for a lot of those places.

We continued doing, uh, performances at some of the major folk festivals, and when we were at the Winnipeg Folk Festival--you know, these folk festivals were so huge--some of them were--that was about 20,000 people that came--so they had only a very few people made it to main stage, and only a select few of those made it to the evening performances. And we were one of those. We told on Saturday night, main stage, you know, twenty or thirty thousand people out there in front of us, and it was really thrilling. And I remember, as we were leaving Winnipeg, getting on the plane--and Barbara and I never sat on the plane together 'cause people sitting next to us would always ask us about what we did, so you know, the two of us--you know, if it was three in a row one person would be listening to, "Well we started at the library"--and we always sat on opposite sides and gave ourselves a little distance, um, when we were travelling. But I remember--so Barbara was maybe several rows behind me or something--and I was putting something in the overhead rack, and I said something to Barbara, and a woman said, "Were you--are you a storyteller?" And it had been broadcast on CBC [Canadian Broadcasting Company], which is the, uh, NPR of Canada. It was broadcast live so millions of people heard us. So that was pretty thrilling to be able to hear that. We also told at the Philly Folk Festival--again--main stage on a Saturday night with 20,000 people sitting out there, and so we had a lot of experiences like that, and we were able to continue doing those very intimate storytelling--you know, where you could see everyone's face and one of the, um, ways that I describe what happens when I'm on stage--it's as if--myself and the listeners--as if we were all breathing together. And it's an incredibly powerful experience--transforming--I just love it. I--I walk off stage, still today, feeling energized. I might end up getting tired, you know, if I've done six performances in two and half days or less time and done a two-hour workshop as well, but I'm not drained. I'm not, Oh, I can't believe I have to go on stage again. It is--ah, I just love it. I feel very lucky.

Brooks: Yeah. Um, in the world of, uh, standup comedy, people talk a lot about, like, bombing. Is that a thing in storytelling? Like, or in your experience, where you just can't connect to audience, or you just have an off night, or is that not really--

Regan-Blake: Well, I'll answer that question, but I'll say first--the first time that we were in England telling stories--they tell in pubs over there, but the pubs get really--we went over for a major international festival--the Sidmouth International Folk Festival--but, um, we were telling in pubs as well. But they get very quiet--everyone's listen--listens very carefully--and someone afterwards came over--came up to us--with a big smile on his face, and he said, "Boy, you went over like a bomb." And we said, "Really?" But it turned out that is a compliment--to go over like a bomb [Brooks laughs]. So I was just reminded of that as you said, "Did you ever bomb?"

Brooks: Oh sure, bomb.

[01:49:57]

Regan-Blake: Do you know, in these almost fifty years of telling stories, I have never walked off stage and thought, It did not work. I definitely have come off thinking, That was extraordinary, and another time thinking, That was not my peak. But it was never, Oh god I forgot it, or, I didn't connect with the audience. It's--and I think-- I've never thought of this before as far as with humor--but maybe stories have a little bit more of a universal feel, and I'm not looking for laughs. You know, in some ways it could be that some of those comedians that are saying that are more because they weren't vocal. I learned early on that you cannot go--on listening-- and this is one of the things I teach with both when I do one-on-one coaching and workshops--to trust the energy of the room, but not trust your eyes or what you're hearing 'cause some audiences are very quiet. Some people might listen by closing their eyes, and you could easily think, Oh they're bored, when really they have been transported to a different time and place and are so into that story--that might be the very person that comes up afterwards and says, you know, "My life is changed because of that story." I've had that happen several times, actually. Yeah, it's--it's amazing the impact that stories can have, but I have never really walked off thinking, That was miserable, or, I don't think I wanna keep doing this, it just hasn't happened.

Brooks: Mm.

Regan-Blake: Yeah.

Brooks: Um, and how did things change, um after you started solo?

Regan-Blake: That was very different. I will tell you, uh--can we take a little bit of a break? Is that--

Brooks: Yeah, sure.

Regan-Blake: Why don't we do that, and I'd--

[01:52:00] [End SHEOH_022_01]

[Start SHEOH_022_02]

Regan-Blake: Barbara and I, uh started this, uh, freelance, full-time professional storytelling. Uh, the media was very interested in it and--because it was, you know, kind of an unknown before then, or it hadn't really happened--and we were interviewed a lot, and, uh, I remember one time we were being interviewed by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. And we had told stories in Philadelphia, and one of them the interviewer asked us if we had ever had a, um, background of, um, theatrical. And I said, "No, I've never been on the stage," and Barbara said, "Oh I was." And I said, "Really?," and she said, "Yeah," she said--and I said, "What play were you in?"--'cause I--we were so close, and I'd never heard--and she said, "I was in, uh, let me think, uh, it

was Brigadoon," and I said, "Really? What part did you play?" And she sat there for a few minutes and her eyes were rolling like she was trying to remember. She said, "Uh, I was the usher." [Brooks laughs] And I always thought that was such a telling story about Barbara, and who she was--to know that she had felt like she had been in that play because she had seen it every night. Uh, she was really--and still is--a very, uh, unique and extraordinary person.

But it was a number of years after that--so we were interviewed--you know *School Library Journal* interviewed us, and, uh, we were actually telling stories in--up in the Northeast at a library school. And the person that--we knew we'd been interviewed for this article--we were thrilled about it being in that magazine 'cause that was just revered, so--and the person that introduced us--she was a university professor--this was in Pittsburgh. And she said, "Well our storytellers today--I don't think they know this--but they are actually cover girls," and she brought out the *School Library Journal*, and there we were on the cover of *School Library Journal*. It was the first time that they had ever put people on their cover. It was always either books or illustrations. They never had had humans, and we were the first, and here we were--I've actually got a picture I'll show you if you'd like--I've that.

Um, we also, in those early days, were interviewed by *School Library Journal*--I mean by, um, a new age magazine, which was kind of a brand new thing that happened back in the eighties--late seventies and early eighties--and they put us on the cover of that magazine too. It was, um--though my brother was impressed when we were in *Field and Stream* [laughs], so we were in lots of magazines--we were in *Good Housekeeping*--lots of newspapers--'cause people had just never heard of this kind of thing. So that was a very cool kind of thing to, you know--especially when we were still travelling full-time, we actually were interviewed for the Walter Cronkite--which was the, um, the main evening news at 6:30 across the United States on one of the major networks. He's considered one of the best, um, newsmen ever. And we were not interviewed by him, but by someone else. And this is when we were travelling, and he had interviewed us, and we were really excited, you know, and the cameras and all, and I had--they'd filmed us doing some stories, and we were travelling though, so every night we'd have to start looking for a TV that we could--'cause we didn't know when it was gonna be on--so we had to try to find some public TV or ask someone, "Can we come in and watch the evening news?" But it turned out--we did that for like a week or ten days--and then I think we got back in touch, and it turned out there had been some kind of major event, uh, politically worldwide that had happened. So that piece never did air on the evening news.

But we were on *Good Morning America*, and they interviewed us on that, and we told the story and such, but so--it was a lot of fun in those, um--and I still enjoy being interviewed--but especially in the early days there was a lot of that TV and radio and newspapers and magazines, so my parents got a kick out of that, too.

[00:05:06]

Brooks: Yeah. Did you feel like you were famous?

Regan-Blake: You know, I say that we were famous in the storytelling world [laughs], so--

Brooks: Yeah.

Regan-Blake: Uh, yeah so people definitely knew about us in that world, but it was a tiny sliver, you know. I never--one of the first, um--I guess it was--it was maybe in the first three years or something, uh, that we were doing a festival. It was an indoor winter festival in upstate New York, and, uh, Niskayuna is the name of the New York city--town--and the festival there. And they had invited us. And it was all of those--almost all--of those folk festivals were all music or ballad singers or, like I said, some singer-songwriter, but not other storytellers, and, uh, so that was a new thing for most of the people. But at one of this--the Saturday night performance before it--they often--part of your pay was to get fed and they would have, like, potlucks for the community and of them would bring things, and then the performers would all be invited to come. And I remember we were at one of those before the Saturday evening performance, and this, uh, gentleman came up to us and said, "I heard y'all are the storytellers, and y'all were gonna be performing tonight. Is that right," and we said, "Yeah, yeah," and he said, "I don't wanna be rude, but isn't that boring?" [laughs] Of course it was rude, but we could tell right away that he had a kind heart, and our attitude, really--we never took offense at whatever anyone said about, What was this gonna be like, or their own preconceptions, or--it was really, I think, this kind of gift that we ended up embracing--that we felt--and I still feel this--our storytelling is a gift, and if people wanna take that gift--terrific and if not that's okay. But it turns out that people do--they want that gift. And he was great. He came up to us after the evening performance, and he said, "I am so sorry;" he said, "I am embarrassed," and he said, "It's not how"--'cause he said, "How are you gonna keep their attention?"--and that was his question--he said, "It's not how can you keep our attention. It's how long can we possibly keep you up there to keep telling?" And it was really lovely, but we were met with that all the time as we travelled--all of these different conceptions about storytelling. And it was just not--and I don't think that we did it any kind of a, uh--I don't know if I'll be able to think of that word--but it wasn't like we were, Ha ha ha, what do they know? It wasn't--it wasn't that kind of attitude at all--it was much more of a, Oh wait and see--you know--See if you like it, kind of thing. That felt like a little gift that we weren't haughty about it, or we didn't take offense--we just didn't. And you know, we did that storytelling for all those years, um--the three years that we were travelling and then on into the late seventies--but I was gonna tell you about another kind of seminal event.

Once I met Phil, and then when we fell in love, and we were still travelling, but I was wanting to not travel as much and to not do as many of those festivals,

especially in the summertime. So, um, we got together with a man named John Basinger, and we had met him--he's one of the people, um, that was--in the very beginning--a touring performer with the National Theatre of the Deaf--and we met him at an event out in Boulder, Colorado. And I might just tell you about that event, too. In a second, I'll come back to it. But we met John and became good friends, and he came down here--he is a hearing-speaking person, but he did interpreting on stage with the Theatre of the Deaf and travelled and toured with them--and I invited them to the National Storytelling Festival. He was performing at the time with a man named Sam Edwards. So I think that was in 1977 that--or '78--that they were featured at the festival, and John was featured a couple of other times, too. But we invited--we just loved John--so whenever we were in Connecticut we would do things with him, and then we would invite him down here, and we taught at one of the local colleges--Warren Wilson--we taught, uh, every summer a five day workshop, and John would come--and he had such a valuable, uh, way of looking at things through the eyes of having been on stage and interpreting. I learned so much from him, but--and he also had been a director--or was a director.

[00:10:33]

So Barbara and I decided that, to get to stay at home more, we were going to put together a show. The way we had it envisioned was to do kind of a run of the same show--you know, maybe do three or four shows a night--maybe a couple of weeks in the summertime. And so we wanted to take our best love--stories--and put them more into, um, an order--'cause when we were performing and travelling, we would decide what we were gonna tell that--sometimes on stage--but we would make a list before-hand as a guideline, but it was very open for either of us changing that. We really trusted each other on that, and so sometimes it was as the audience--sometimes I feel like--sometimes I was getting a--from the audience--a tap on the shoulder, maybe wanting a different story. And so we would shift like that, but we had never done--we didn't have a show that we went out and did, so we thought maybe we would do that. So we asked John to come down and help us put together--and how we might flow from one story to another and--and, um, his wife was a university professor, and John was kind of taking that summer to hang out with his daughter, who was a teenager--a young teenager--so Savannah came too--that's his daughter's name. And so what turned out--instead of it being a show--this story leading into that story--it turned out to be a play of our stories, and we called it "Mountain Sweet Talk." And we did over 300 performances over eight seasons, and we did it at the Folk Art Center right on the Blue Ridge Parkway, and it was--and still is--Asheville's longest running theatrical production.

And that was a whole different experience. We had never, you know, hit a light mark--or, you know--and we had lights and some audio, so we some, you know, fiddle-playing at different places, and this story just grew almost organically--some of it true--we did have a great aunt Jenny, but we didn't really know her, but

in it she's raising two girls in the mountains and times are really rough and one of them has to go to Ohio to work. And this is her--so some of the communication is what's happening back home--us reminiscing in the play--and then it's how--at the end--it's how we become professional storytellers. And it was a grand success. And I still have people--as recently as the last month--I had someone email and say, "I'm so glad I have found you. I came to 'Mountain Sweet Talk.'" And we had people--we had something called a frequent buyer program that they got a discount. We had--the person that came the most was in the twenties--they had come to it twenty-two or twenty-three times--but lots of people had come ten and twelve times and would plan their families coming to visit them--they would call us and find out when our run was gonna be so that they could be sure and bring family to it. And so that was--that was really an exciting, uh, aspect of one of the things that we did, so--

Brooks: Yeah. And you were gonna say something about Boulder, Colorado?

[00:14:10]

Regan-Blake: Yes, so--and this can be the last on, uh, those twenty years with Barbara--but we got a call--um, it was shortly after we had done that NPR radio interview with Steve Wrath--we got a call from someone--uh, Walker was his name, which seemed unusual--for somebody to have a first name 'Walker'--but he said he was with the Boulder Healing Arts Festival and was asking us to come out and perform during the week of their Healing Arts Festival that was put on by the Boulder School on Massage Therapy. Now this was in the seventies, and we had just moved to Asheville--so it was around--it might have even been before we moved here full-time--and it was around '77, I guess--'77 or '78--and, you know, the only thing we knew about massage was, uh, in massage parlors that were, you know, in the not-such-a-good part of town and did more things than massage. And we'd never been to Colorado, and it just sounded too woo-woo for us, you know, it was like--and I remember we had looked on our calendar--we were very polite to him--and said--luck--we felt at the time--luckily, um, we were booked when he wanted us to come, you know, for that festival. Well then, a few weeks later he called and asked us for the next year, and we weren't booked, and Barbara and I just kind of looked at each other and said, "Let's do it." And it was life-changing--life-changing on so many different layers. I met people that are still dear friends. That's where we met John Basinger, who became the co-writer and director of our play. We also met, um, the man who wrote that new age magazine cover story and travelled with us. We met the folks that, um, are involved in a place called Hollyhock on, uh, Cortes Island, which is an island off the coast of Vancouver. And I've been up there and done workshops.

One of the people we met at that--in 1978--at that Healing Arts Festival, she went on to--she and her husband--were in Uganda, and her husband was from Colorado, and had worked early on with AIDS patients. And so in the early 2000s, he was invited to come to Uganda to work with doctors from all over

Africa--they were bringing in doctors to help, um, teach what he knew about treating AIDS patients--and kind, wonderful man—Charles [Steinberg]--and his wife, Torkin [Wakefield]--unusual name--but Torkin--they were to go over there for three months--and she went with this wonderful attitude of, How can I be of service? And she and two other women--one of them her daughter--the other her best friend--happened to be walking down a dirt path, and they saw a woman sitting beside that path selling necklaces, and they were kind of intrigued--you know, they looked at the necklaces--and the woman was making the beads for that necklace. And she was taking long strips of paper--triangular shaped—rolling up that paper, putting a little dot of glue on the end, putting it over into a basket, and then they found out by asking her that once that basket was full, she would string up all those beads and dip them in shellac and hang 'em up to dry. Then after a couple of weeks she would dip them again and dry and dip them again, and then she was making these necklaces. Well, Torkin loved them and she bought three of the necklaces, and the next day she was, uh, meeting with someone--the head of an orphanage--and she went into the meeting, and the woman admired the necklace that she had on, and Torkin took it off and gave it to her. And the very next day, she was meeting Charles, her husband, for lunch, and she had gone to the medical center and was walking through, and one of the secretaries stopped her--'cause she had another one of those beads on--and the secretary said, "Oh I love that necklace," and Torkin took it off and gave it her. Well Torkin ended up starting a non-profit called BeadforLife that I could do three hours--ten days--on [Brooks laughs], but I won't go that direction, but I will tell you that I became very involved in BeadforLife, and then I was invited to go to, uh, Uganda to listen to the stories of the women there. I have seventeen hours of recording, and I put together an hour and fifteen minute show, uh, that I do telling stories, and then sometimes I tell shorter stories--so ten minute or fifteen minute stories--about the women. And I then became what they call a community partner, and sold the beads--the jewelry--and a lot of times people, um, would have heard me tell one of these short stories, and they would ask me would I bring the jewelry with me, or could I have BeadforLife send it, so we would have a sale after a performance or at a festival. Volunteers--all of it volunteers--me--all volunteer--and, uh, going back to the story I told you earlier about my momma, I did over a hundred thousand dollars raising selling this jewelry for three dollars and ten dollars and such, and that's still very close to my heart, and that thread of that whole experience goes all the way back to Boulder, Colorado, which goes back to that NPR radio interview in 1977.

[00:20:49]

Brooks: Wow.

Regan-Blake: So I love that we have those, um, paths that go in and out of our lives.

Brooks: Yeah. Wow.

Regan-Blake: So that was the Boulder story [laughs].

Brooks: Great [laughs]. Um, so I think I had asked you before we took a little break what--how things changed once you became a solo storyteller.

Regan-Blake: Yes, dramatically.

Brooks: Yeah.

Regan-Blake: As I mentioned, I had never been on stage almost before at all performing--I'd been on there a lot emceeing--but I remember one of the first times that I was on stage by myself, it was like, When do you drink water? [Brooks laughs] You know, [laughs] when can you take a sip of water, or how do you do this, moving right to the next, and--and it was scary. It was--it was, um--to have gone all those twenty years and been a part of a duo, um--it was a very different experience. But something that happened concurrently that I feel was really the universe calling to me and supporting me--as one of my teachers used to say, the universe is rushing to support us--um, right about that same time--I was already clear for a couple of years earlier and had talked with Barbara that I didn't see us continuing being partners--she had really gone back to her Catholicism in what she actually self-described as fanatical, and, uh, really way off the edge--she was--for me--from my perspective--she was. Some of the stories--which all our stories--some of them were kinda for adults more than kids--but none of them on a risqué side--some of 'em she wasn't even wanting to tell--some of the traditional stories, and it changed a lot of how she was travelling and where she wanted to travel. And so, it became clear to me, but we already had bookings, and because of this interlacing--we had an office; we had somebody working for us full-time--it was a big deal to start seeing how we could pull back some of those interconnections so that we could remain friends and could continue our storytelling. Um, so it took a couple of years for all that to unravel and re-ravel in a different way.

But during that time, I was asked, uh, by a chamber music trio called the Kandinsky Trio--they were headquartered in Salem, Virginia at Roanoke College--they'd been performing--it was a piano trio--so piano, cello, violin--they'd been performing together--and teaching--but they'd been performing together a good while--and their agent wanted to do something kind of different and thought it might be really cool to ask a storyteller to perform with them. And they started looking for a storyteller, and as the cellist used to tease--we used to have these pre-concert talks with the composer, all three of the, um, musicians, and myself--and Alan, the cellist used to tease, "Yeah, we interviewed about 200, but Connie was the first one that said yes," so [laughs], um, but they did go through a lot of storytellers as they were looking, and it was that story that Jimmy Neil had given me at the second--the month before--the second National Storytelling Festival. It's called "Two White Horses." It was that story that the trio heard that knew they wanted me for this, um, performance. So the agent--before it was even written--before the music was written for it or before we kind of knew what it was gonna

be--the agent had booked nine performances along the Appalachians, and it was called--he had already named it--"Tales of Appalachia." And we thought it would be--they thought it would be--different traditional Appalachian stories, uh, with music. And one of the things that I really liked about the project--from the very beginning it was clear--this was not gonna be me up there just for a little interest to the music, and it was not gonna be me as the headliner and the music as background. The trio's intent was that we would become a quartet. It was a foursome--that we were gonna be telling these stories through their instruments and through my voice. And I really liked that idea.

[00:25:58]

And they had found a composer--really interesting guy--Mike Reid--he had played, uh, football for Penn State and been a football hero, and then he went on to be a professional football player for the Cincinnati Bengals. But his true love was music, and so he had, uh--as a professional football player he had been afraid that he was gonna hurt his fingers for--'cause piano was his main instrument--for writing music. And so he'd quit at the height of his football career, moved to Nashville, and he went on to do hit songs, won Grammys for Bonnie Raitt and The Judds [Naomi Judd and Wynonna Judd] and other people. And they had--he had--also this love, though, of classical music--that's how he had started into music, and his--whenever he had started taking music lessons. And so, he was all on board as the composer, and when the trio, uh, picked me, when I said yes, uh, I met--I think even before I met the trio--I was performing in Nashville, so I met Mike, and we talked--I think when we must have done, um, some talking back and forth on which stor--'cause we had come to that it was gonna be one of the stories I had learned from Ray Hicks and what we ended up calling "The Cantankerous Blacksmith"--Ray called it "Wicked John and the Devil"--and when I met with Mike I told him a version of it. But I really made it clear this isn't the type of things where it's these exact words every time, because that's not that way with stories, you know, you can have the--the bones are there. But anyway, he recorded me on a little cassette recorder back in 1995--maybe late '94--and, um--and then we met with Salem. So he--the next step though, actually, was he started doing--I can't remember what they call them, but it's like sketches--you know, just some ideas of what he might do with this piece--how he might put it together. And he sent 'em to the trio--and this is one of the stories--I love this--to me it's kind of a life lesson story, too--but he sent it to the trio, and as Alan [Alan Weinstein] and Liz [Elizabeth Bachelder] and Bendy [Benedict Goodfriend]--all three of them would tell this story later--it was terrible. The sketches were terrible. And they said, you know, if it had been any better they might have done it, but it was just too terrible, and Alan, who was the real comedian of that group, um, he would--in these talks that we would give sometimes--he'd say, "And I was the one that was elected to call this NFL football player and tell him, 'Um we don't like your music--what you sent us,'" but he did. And Mike took that and just went through the stratosphere with it. He came up with this brilliant piece of music that if the trio came in, and we had the baby grand or full grand for Liz,

and--we'd maybe need a quick run-through--and we'd be ready to perform it for tonight. It just was--it was just an incredible piece. The first weekend together we really--we did a run-through before I left--and it was as if we could have performed that in front of an audience. And there was, in lots of ways, a lot of pressure 'cause we already had nine performances. But when that piece--when the sketches were so bad--the trio had already said, "Well we'll just have to get through these nine pieces and that'll be it"--and the life lesson to me, from all that, is that what we call failure is often a door into a whole new stratosphere of success. Because if Mike's pieces were a little bit better, they wouldn't have said anything. We would have done those nine shows, and that would have been it.

[00:30:29]

But instead we went on for years--I think it was up in the three hundreds of performances that we did for that--and doing the first year, I think we ended up getting thirty-six bookings, and the next year--and then every year, you know, sometimes it was twenty-four, sometimes it was fifteen, sometimes it was back in the thirties, but we did that for a number of years. And, uh, they would be stretched out over the--so I would go and maybe do five performances with them, and then I would go and do my regular storytelling, and then meet back up with them for another three performances. And that was a huge gift to me for this transition out of being a duo. I was doing solo performances during that time, but to have this experience and to be able to perform with them--and the agent's intent was that--the audience for chamber music was really dwindling--and they thought if they could bring in people that had never heard storytelling that it would be an opening for storytelling, but it could also be bringing in this more theatrical storytelling folk art world, 'cause, you know--and bringing that--bringing those new listeners into the classical music. And, uh, it was a lot of fun. It was very different touring with them, you know, they were a little more--uh, how should I say--a little more moody [laughs] than I was used to, but I'm pretty easygoing person in general [Brooks laughs], and--but their performances were great--and I definitely enjoyed them, it just was--it's a different thing when you travel with someone you know, and it goes on an you're all leaving at a particular time or whatever else, but it was a grand transition for me--and Ray Hicks came to one of those performances. The very first performance we did was at Penn State, where Mike Reid was still a hero. They had the largest audience they'd ever had for classical music. Our opening night was over a thousand people to hear our very first performance of that piece called "Cantankerous Blacksmith." We have a recording of it, and, um, and then it was the high--one of the highlights--of my life to have Ray come and sit in the second row in his bib overalls, and we're on stage, you know, in our modified tux--you know, spiffy kind of tux with a bit of jewels on 'em--and have him taken in this whole different "Wicked John" was such a relish--and slapping his leg and laughing and telling me afterwards, "Connie, don't let 'em forget me, and you tell on, tell on." So it was a real seminal moment in my life.

Brooks: Did you ever get nervous before a performance?

Regan-Blake: Do you know, I know that most performers--especially actors that you hear, like, on evening, uh--you know, the late-night shows and stuff like that--interviews, they really look at that nervousness and talk about it as if it's really a part of performance--that they give a good performance because of that--I'm--and I appreciate that people get nervous; I really do understand that--but I think I'm just wired a little differently. I get excited, and I remember being nervous once the first time after Barbara and I had quit our jobs that I was at home, and mom and dad had invited some friends, and it was the first time for my dad to hear me tell that story that was more for adults, "The Two White Horses," and I remember feeling nervous then. But, in general, I'm not nervous. I get maybe a different kind of excitement when it's a brand-new story, you know, and I might have a little different focus, Oh I hope I remember it, but I'm never--what I think of anyway--my definition of nervous--I'm not--nervous. Yeah, I feel good.

[00:35:00]

Brooks: Do you ever, um, retire stories, or so you just add more to your arsenal?

Regan-Blake: Almost never retire stories. And that's another thing that I like to teach people--to find a story that you really love. And then my approach to it is that, for these people in the audience--even if they've heard a particular story before--this is a brand-new experience. Never on February 20th, 2020--or whatever that date is--never have we gathered in this way at this moment with that person sitting next to you and heard this story--so there's a newness. And I think of my stories as old friends, and so from a lot of us--and I'm particularly this way--I feel like I have carried my old friends with me--so not every single one of 'em--so there might be a few, you know, that maybe I learned and told and didn't quite resonate--or don't resonate with me that much anymore--but like my friends--I'm still friends with a lot of my high school friends--getting ready to go to a 55th high school reunion in two months, and I'm still in touch with a good number of them. My college friends--people when I lived in Chattanooga--I feel like the stories are like my friends and family that keep moving with me. Now I have to make decisions 'cause I am--I'm not learning new stories like I did in the beginning days or--so it's not like every month or two I'm learning a new story--but I definitely do new stories, and so there might be some stories that I don't tell as often, but it's still with that old joy of going back to an old friend.

Brooks: Do you have a favorite genre of stories?

Regan-Blake: I don't. I--I love, uh, that I tell different types of stories. For lots of years it was only, uh, traditional stories--so those are the traditional mountain tales that are not really written by anyone; like "Wicked John," they're passed along, and then different personalities insert themselves in the telling, but they don't belong to a person--or literary tales that are written, uh, by someone, like Maurice Sendak--

those children's ones. So I tell some of both of those types of genres. I went for a number of years not telling personal experience--and really you didn't even hear that in the storytelling world. Then back in the eighties, which was really coming into twenty years since I had been telling stories, personal experience stories started becoming very popular. And I really enjoy 'em--some festivals are almost all personal experience and funny--I don't like that. I think it's, um--we're depriving our listeners and our tellers of a range of human emotions when we're only aiming for what's funny, uh, or what's our own experience--but I love a combination. So I definitely enjoy telling funny stories--I tell a lot of funny ones--I have some stories that I tell about Phil--some of my travel experiences--so I also tell some true-life stories. So I tell one story about a woman who was born and raised in England--close to the coast--and she learned to fly as a nine year old--this was back in the late 1930s and early '40s--and a neighbor had a plane, and she--he--without telling her family--taught her how to fly 'cause she used to love to go up, and during the call--Churchill's call for people to go to Dunkirk--she flew missions--she took that same neighbor's small plane, landed on the beaches of Dunkirk and brought--she was a teenager by then--brought wounded soldiers back, and she ended up--she was only seventeen--she ended up becoming a spy, and had an incredible story. I read about it in a newspaper on my way down to Jacksonville to visit family. She was living in Saint Augustine, so I got to go and interview her, and, um, so I do a--that kind of a story. So what I call true-life historical stories.

Brooks: Wow.

Regan-Blake: So a real variety of stories.

Brooks: Yeah. Um, so is there anything else about--I'm sure there is--but what else about your solo career and kind of take us up to now and what you're doing these days.

[00:40:04]

Regan-Blake: Uh, well that whole thing that I've already mentioned about going to Uganda, and, um, that was--it really changed my perspective on life in lots of ways. The women that I was, um, interviewing had been working with BeadforLife--and BeadforLife--I love their whole approach. You know, my friend Torkin is the one that started it--it's still going on today--she started it in '03, and she and her husband, Charles, ended up living in Uganda for three years, and then the United States headquarters, um, is in Boulder--back to Boulder, isn't that interesting--

Brooks: There you go. Hmm.

Regan-Blake: That's uh very seminal things that radiate out--including--that's interesting!--I like that--so including me going out to Colorado when I was in college to work and doing that kind of travel--my first travel on a plane--and then going to that Healing Arts Festival and then all involved with BeadforLife, um. But the

women, um--one of the things that I liked so much about the approach of BeadforLife was not going into a group of people and saying, "Aw, gosh, you need so much help. You don't have enough food. You don't have anything. Here let me help you. Do this and do that." Instead they really went with these open hearts, open ears--and for a storyteller--what they did was ask questions and listen--"How is it maybe we could help you?" And they went back to--um, when they decided--you know, when this started building--they went back and found--let me see if the woman's name--that they first met there, sitting by that dirt path--uh, they stayed in contact with her, went back--and her name is not coming to me now, but maybe it will before we finish--I met her. And they ended up bringing together groups of around twenty to twenty-five women. The women would name themselves and were a huge support to each other, and they learned how to make the jewelry, how to roll the beads, and BeadforLife, uh--and this is in quotes, kind of--loaned them the money to get the materials--they did eventually pay it back--so no part of the program is, uh, outright donation, in a sense. It's all the dignity of work, and the idea was that the women would do this for eighteen months, be able to save money--all of the women opened up a savings account after BeadforLife found out that a lot of women would sell their jewelry to BeadforLife and then three days later would not have any money because if they went back to their community, everyone felt that that money belonged to all of them--and so they--as BeadforLife listened to this and saw the need--they, uh, gave the option for opening bank accounts. So every woman chose to do that and could as much of that money in the bank account and then go home with three dollars rather than twenty-five dollars, which made a huge difference in what they were able to save for and be able to get their own home with a door. That was a huge thing. All the places that I interviewed the women, they all had an opening with a piece of material, and, uh, to have a door was a huge step up in, um, their economic lives. You even saw doors being sold, um, on the streets in Uganda--especially in the slums--so if somebody had a door, it was a big deal. And when we think about what a difference that would make in our lives--if we didn't have a door, and we had children, and we had no money, and it's--it's a very different life. And because BeadforLife had brought me in and told the women that they were introducing me to that I was part of the BeadforLife family, those women brought me right into their families, and they told me stories that--a lot of them had been in northern Uganda, um, with the LRA [Lord's Resistance Army], and had witnessed, um--what I say in one of my stories--they had witnessed what we Americans like to call unimaginable, but the reason we wanna say that is because we don't wanna imagine what it was that they lived through. And they told me those stories--they were in a very different place now--but BeadforLife, their families, their friends, their dear companions had asked them to tell me, so they told me those hard parts, and there were times when I would be weeping so in hearing this story that the women would stop to console me because I was having such a hard time even hearing their stories and what they had been through.

[00:45:36]

And, uh--and that program has done incredible things. All of their--it's a model now, called Street Business School--so anyone listening to this can google that, and, uh, they can still buy the beads. I've got some on today that are made out of paper. BeadforLife is still a good presence on the website and such, and they've gone on to help women with whatever skill--so they don't necessarily need to learn how to make the beads--they've developed a program that is much shorter. They can get to many more people, and so if that person happens to have a plot of ground where they can have chickens, then they can help them develop that business--maybe they've seen 'em on the street selling, uh--making eggs and selling 'em--and they can help them devel--so they bring them into what they call the Street Business School. Or maybe they're a tailor--they have sewing skills--and they can go from sitting like that woman did--uh, Millie Grace [Akena]--sitting beside that path selling jewelry--they can help that person go to having a business. You know, either out of their home or actually renting a place. And now, they've expanded even further where they are travelling to different parts of the world where there is this extreme poverty and teaching, um, non-profits in those places and teaching locals how to teach Street Business School. So it's spreading in so many incredible ways, and it really--all of that--reminds me of storytelling. It's the way stories are transported and transmitted, and they use a storytelling style for teaching and for spreading this way--of really eradicating poverty. They're getting to millions of people now. So that's been a huge part of my life, and it's continued to influence even how I see poverty and wealth. You know, we Americans tend to think that--well--we are wealthy--and we put that in quotes. And when we hear about people in extreme poverty--even those that might think of ourselves as lower-middle class or middle class or--we still realize there's wealth there, but so much of that is material, and I think that experience, uh, certainly helped me to understand a different definition of those words--that so many people in what we call the civilized world have a poverty of our life experiences and our connections with other people, and, uh, we have a lot to learn.

Brooks: Um, anything else that we haven't touched on, um, up until now? And I'm kind of curious--

Regan-Blake: We've covered a lot. I think one thing that just comes to mind is that, um--both that Uganda also--uh, went from Uganda to, um, I told stories for about a week in Dubai, and, um, more recently--two years ago I was down in Peru and told some stories--and I've also told some stories in Tibet. So I've now told stories on six continents. I don't think I'm even gonna try for the seventh [Brooks laughs]. I used to say, "If anybody knows anyone, uh, on the seventh," uh, but I think I don't even want to make that crossing--

Brooks: No [laughs].

[00:49:20]

Regan-Blake: --down [laughs] below Argentina. I've heard to many stories that--but, um, it's-- I've travelled in thirty--I think it's around thirty-six--countries. But I've performed--told stories--in seventeen or eighteen now, and I did end up making it to Australia, which was thrilling--uh, that dream when I was back backpacking in the late sixties--and then still travelling around the United States. It's, uh--I feel very fortunate to do this. A lot of my work now is with coaching, which I love. I do it on Skype and on Zoom, and I work with people in very different fields from storytelling--you know, trial lawyers and, um, CEOs and most recently with a golf professional who teaches classes--both online and in-person--to other golf professionals, and he wanted to have storytelling as part of that, so he came down--and we'd been doing things on Zoom--and he came down from Vermont, and we worked together for four days on his storytelling--so that brings me a lot of joy. I, uh--and I love being in the moment of their creating--to be a witness for that and to help guide it and move it--whatever steps they're wanting to take, uh--move them along on their creative path--is a real joy.

Brooks: Mm-hm. And, uh, you have a collection in the Library of Congress. Is that correct?

Regan-Blake: Yes, uh, that was actually a number of years ago. In the early days I used to travel with a, um, little cassette recorder--and I had lots of cassettes--and at all these folk music festivals I would sometimes record some of the people on stage. So there were some--I happened upon--and, you know, I saved all that stuff--I really, you know--even in those first three years of doing this--travelled full-time--I saved posters and flyers, and I saved a lot, and, um, what happened--it's now been a number of years ago when it first happened--I was down in my storage area, and I came upon a whole box of some of these CDs--uh, cassettes--that I had recorded. And it was some people that are very famous in the folk world. Tommy Jarrell, who was a fiddler--a lot of, uh, fiddlers after him would learn from him--would travel to his North Carolina home. I had some Marshall Dodge--that humorist, um, that I mentioned earlier--and some other people recorded, I thought, Gosh--and I had met, uh, a man from the Library of Congress, and--Todd--and so I either emailed him or called him, and I said, "I just"--I must have called him--I said, "Todd, I've just come upon this whole box of recordings of folk music that i made--personal recordings--and I'm wondering if you would like those," and he said, "Yes," and he said, "We'll put 'em in the, uh, Connie Regan-Blake Collection," and I said, "What?" And come to find out, the, um--Barbara--had actually, uh, at some point gotten rid of a lot of her stuff and--her early, collected kind of folk teller stuff--and she had it in boxes and took it over to the --what is now called--the International Storytelling, uh, Center--and that's who puts on the National Storytelling Festival that I've been talking about--which by the way now has around ten to eleven thousand people that come--so it grew a bit from those thirty-five at the first one--but Barbara had just donated this stuff to them. They didn't really have any place for it, so they gave it Todd, and Todd had gone through a lot of it, and, uh, they had started this collection, and--at the time I don't think they were actually calling it--he did say, "The Connie Regan-Blake

Collection," but they probably weren't calling it that, they were probably calling it "The Folkteller Collection," but he said, "And as a matter of fact, we'll take those cassettes, and we'll take anything else you have." And so we started talking about it--I let a few years go by, um, without doing much--and then Todd got back in touch with me and said, "How about it?" And so at some point, then, I ended up packing up about--I think I sent--around twelve boxes of, um--you know, banker's boxes--of stuff, and I have probably another twenty to send him. And they have been--a lot of that is now online and available. Now it is the "Connie Regan-Blake Collection."

Brooks: Officially? Yeah.

[00:54:27]

Regan-Blake: Yes. And, um, he wants everything that I have--everything that I've written something on and--which is a lot. You know, I feel like I was really guided to save all that because it's not like I'm kind of a, you know, a pack rat to where, um--but I did save everything involved with, um, our--the storytelling. So a lot of that is even before Barbara and I became partners--all through that time and then all through this time. And I remember I was interviewed by a local NPR station when this was first announced--about this collection--and they said, "Well how do you see people using it?" And one thing that came to me in that moment as he asked that question was I could see someone that was interested in storytelling and maybe their real passion is design, and they could back and see that first flyer that Bill Domler printed in Xerox in his copy machine with the first photograph--professional photograph--ever taken of us--they could see that right up through 1975, all the way through to as far as today 2020, and see my flyers today, and see that whole progression--that that might be of interest to see how that transformed, and how we put the word out as duo and how I put the word out as a solo artist. And so I can just--you know, it's gonna be av--you know it's available around the world--a lot of it--but eventually, once I die, they say they want everything. So there's some things I'm not gonna send. I am hoping that I'll do another fifteen or boxes before the next year or two. Todd is still in touch with me, and I keep saying, "Yes, it's coming." Um, but, um, it's a major--you know, every time I pick up the paper then it's either those memories around it or--and I'm still performing a lot and travelling a lot and have a lot of projects I'm very involved in, um--keeping Ray Hicks's legacy alive, and so I work on his website, and we just did a major update of that. And so there's a lot going on, but I do hope to--my plan is to get back to it and that, certainly when I die, you know--even, you know--and that's a--to me an interesting thing--this progression from '71 up to present day--is we--uh, I have so much that's on paper, and now very little of it is on paper. And I think that will be a real advantage 'cause I've got posters--I've got letters. My--I wrote my parents in those first three years of travelling--there was very few phone calls--almost all of it was through letters--and so I've got that kind of a diary--kind of a written--of where we were going and how we were being received. I kept copies of letters from other people--some famous children's authors--so I've got

some of those. All of that will be in that collection. And then, once I die, my whole computer will be, you know, so they'll--and I've kept all of that--way before Todd asked me about doing this. I just--you know, once I started on my own and started using a computer all the time--I have files from 2003--the bookings--2004--the bookings--I've got all those now, not on paper, most of 'em--most of 'em, uh, as digital files. But the Library of Congress will have all of that, so, yeah.

Brooks: Wow. That's really neat

Regan-Blake: Yeah. Yeah, I'm thrilled about that. I feel so honored and, uh, delighted.

Brooks: Is it the Folk Life Center?

Regan-Blake: Yes. Mm-hmm.

Brooks: Okay. Um, and I was gonna ask how--how much you're working these days, but it seems like as much as ever.

Regan-Blake: So not quite as much as I was before in the touring. I'm still, uh, travelling, but this coaching, now, is almost about a third--I still do workshops, and I really enjoy that as well--and I'm not doing quite as much performing. I got a, uh, email from somebody down in Texas--it was a big church that was, uh, asking me to come down. At first I actually even thought, Oh maybe that's spam--maybe that's going out to all the--but I saw it was to me, and I looked up the person and they were real--they were a real person that lived in Dallas--but it was like, Ah, do I want to get on a plane and go to Dallas? [laughs] Any place that I have good friends like San Francisco--and I know some people in the Dallas area, but--you know, if it's in Ithaca or that area or New York City--so I love travelling to places where I have, uh, already a real community or someone that I would love to see--and then exotic places. You know, when I was invited to go to New Zealand--I've been there twice to perform, and Phil went with me both times--and we love Utah, so any time I get a performance request in Utah it's a given I'm gonna go because Phil will plan a trip around it. So I do that kind of touring, but I'm not doing--and, plus, schools used to be a big part of what I did--all the way from high school down through those kindergartners--you know, different stories for different age groups--but I was doing a lot of storytelling--that was a big part of my income. Schools in general don't have the funds for that now, and a lot of 'em don't feel like they even have the time because there's--they're teaching to the test--and so the arts have really been a victim, and I think we're gonna find--hopefully the light will come back on and we'll find--and people are doing research in these areas of how developing the artistic mind at an early age in children had a huge impact on their quality of life and on their thinking skills.

[01:00:37]

Brooks: Yeah. Um, what would you say about, like, the state of where storytelling is today--and kind of how it's changed?

Regan-Blake: It has evolved in lots of ways. A lot of the festivals are struggling to get an audience there, and some of the straight storytelling festivals, um--a lot of them--if they have big audiences--a lot of them are older. And so there's been a real active kind of outreach, you know, trying to bring in younger people. Concurrent with this storytelling revival of performance, uh--and stage performance of storytelling--um, people took kind of a little different look on that, and so we have, um--oh what's the NPR show--not the Slams [maybe, *The Moth*: *StorySLAM* or *The Moth GrandSLAM* storytelling competitions], and not *The*--uh-

Brooks: *The Moth*?

Regan-Blake: Oh *The Moth* is certainly one of them--but *StoryCorps*.

Brooks: Yes.

Regan-Blake: So that was one of the first ones, and then people loved that so much that *The Moth* grew out, and now the Slams, and so there's that whole world out there--which I'm delighted that it exists--I'm very supportive. But there is a 'but,' and that is it's all personal stories and none of those people get paid.

Brooks: Right.

Regan-Blake: So that's a huge impact on the artistic abilities of people--they're not being recognized in the same way that we storytellers have been--and so, you know, any chance I get I talk about that and encourage other ways--you know, to find other creative ways--of financially supporting our artists, kind of no matter what genre they're doing their storytelling in.

Brooks: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I think--I'm particularly interested kind of on your take about *StoryCorps*, um, and the things that rose out of it because, um, my field--oral history--often gets compared to *StoryCorps*--kind of like, "Well what's the difference," and there is, but it's interesting to try to explain it to folks--

Regan-Blake: Yeah.

Brooks: Um, like, 'cause there is overlap--right--there is overlap in what you and I are doing right now and--and--what you do on stage, and what *StoryCorps* does, but they're not the same things.

Regan-Blake: That's right.

Brooks: And so, yeah, so--I guess that's just--I'm just--that's interesting. I never had really considered the fact that the trend that is--of present day--is of people who are not professionals, people who are kinda--just getting on stage and might just be doing a one-off telling, not getting paid, um--

Regan-Blake: Or they might, uh, win that *Slam* or that *Moth*, and then because the radio show is so popular, they might go to Chicago if they're from New York, or they might travel, but they're not making their--they're not able to make their living--this is, you know, they're--

Brooks: Yeah. Right. Yeah. Hmm.

[01:03:45]

Regan-Blake: And I think--I love *StoryCorps*, and I listen to it any chance I get, um--but those are those nuggets, and they--you know--they serve so many, um, wonderful purposes in our lives today. I think it encourages people to go home and ask their partner or their parents or grandparents or a child--to ask them--about a particular thing or to draw up those memories themselves. Um, so I love all those aspects. But it's still leaving the traditional stories. These stories that have been around hundred, sometimes thousands of years, that are at the core of who we humans are and what matters to us. To see and hear those stories still told and some of the--you know, I guess with life--with almost every aspect of life--we continue having stereotypes. And some of that is it's like a quick little go-to. It's like a little meme. It's like, Oh that's that, and then we feel like, Oh we know now what that is. But today people think, Traditional stories? Oh, boring. You know, we're kind of back to people thinking that, even if they've never even heard of--heard--a traditional story. There's something about hearing an old story as opposed to what happened to your roommate last Saturday night at the bar or at their family squabble, you know. And I think all of those places have a, um--I want them to take the stage, and I want people to listen and be inspired to tell stories, but I would--including at the storytelling festivals--but these funny, personal stories--that is the main genre now, and we didn't have that at all in the early days. And the rest of the country--the rest of world--Europe--looks to us and say, "Why are you telling about your second-grade teacher?" You know, and that's a big part of the storytelling at the festivals here in the United States, but you just don't hear that in Europe or--uh, you know--in different places around the world. They might tell one or tell one as an introduction to a traditional story--so I'd really like to see us Americans get back to a better, uh, blend of types of stories.

Brooks: Mm-hmm. Do you have any kind of go-to either stories or resources that if folks are--like kind of interested in traditional storytelling, but they're not sure where to start--do you have any, like, recommendations that you typically give?

Regan-Blake: The first thing I say is to see if there're any people in your family that tell stories--or your neighborhood--or people that you just know--they might live an hour

away, but you've heard they tell stories kind of in that more traditional way--that's one of the first things. The next thing is to go to the 398.2 section of your public library where all the folktales are, and I encourage people to look to their own tradition first. To look--you know, they might not--it's not that everyone has, "Oh I know"--of course today with [Brooks laughs] DNA testing we do know more, but, um, some people that have been adopted or maybe they have fifteen different strains that are similar, you know, from around the world--but to maybe go to what you feel even a slight kinship. You know, maybe you know that there were, um--that you've--from the far east--that there's some connection that you had--some grandparents that had travelled from Japan or China to California, and that's in your lineage. Or maybe you know there's Irish in your family, or--so to look in that 398.2 section--to have a librarian help you find some of the traditional stories from your own heritage. 'Cause even if you weren't brought up with those Italian traditions--or maybe you didn't have that kind of a life with one specific background--there's still--if there is, um, an area that's there that's a part of who you are--a part of your DNA--then it might be that there's something that resonates a little bit more with you with those traditional stories. So, to start there, to read as many traditional stories as you can.

Uh, there's a storyteller Donald Davis--he's very popular in the storytelling world--and today he tells--and has for probably thirty-five years--only done, uh, personal experience stories. But in the olden days when he first started telling stories--the first time I invited him to be featured at the national festival--he was telling Jack tales. He was telling the traditional stories. And I remember an article that he wrote for a storyteller's magazine--it always had such an impact on me--he said that he was living in Charlotte--he was actually a minister--a Methodist minister at the time--and this was back in the late seventies--and, uh--but he was loving telling stories. He had grown up in western North Carolina, told a lot of stories, heard 'em as a child, and, um, he went to a school and asked--he wrote in this article--he said that he'd gone to a elementary school and asked the principal and the teachers, Were there some students that he could work with for an hour on Friday afternoons, and they said, Uh, yes! Yes, please come and do that. And he said, "Gimme the rowdiest ones." So, he took this group of fourth and fifth graders, and what he did for four or five weeks--it's been a while since I've read that article--but he told stories. So every time he went in, for an hour, he would tell traditional stories. And then, on the fifth week or the sixth week, he started them creating their own stories, and they knew stories. They knew the format. They knew the whole structure--the bones--of what makes a story. They knew it needed a beginning and some, um--something happening--you know, some kind of conflict or something happening, and then a resolution. They knew all the steps--or many of the steps--of storytelling without being taught how to tell a story.

[01:10:30]

And I love that as an example to anyone that wants to tell stories. To immerse yourself in reading stories--to immerse yourself in hearing storytellers. The best is

to hear 'em live 'cause you get to be in the energy as that story is being co-created in that moment. The second best is, um, on video, so you get to actually--so there's lots online--I've got a lot of stories on YouTube and such like that--um, but that way you get to see and hear them tell stories--a wide variety. And then on recordings--you know, all the CDs that are out there. So those are all ways to bring story and story form--it can be like getting a master's in storytelling--but especially starting with these traditional stories. And then as you go to hear stories, to try to hear traditional stories told live--um, in-person is the best--but also on video and then on the audio recordings as well.

Brooks: Mm-hmm. Wow. Um, well I have some kind of wrap-up questions that I ask everyone, um, but I feel like we kind of zoomed through your, like, your later years, so is there anything else about your more recent career that you think we should cover?

Regan-Blake: Uh, nothing that's really, uh, coming to me now--

Brooks: I'll take a look at your--I mean I'm sure you've gotten a lot of accolades that we have not discussed, um--I think--you said that you got the--the trio of something? Did I make that up? The [National Storytelling Network] ORACLE [Organization/Originality, Reliability, Achievements, Creativity, Leadership, Excellence] Awards?

Regan-Blake: Oh, that's the, um--

Brooks: The Trifecta of ORACLE Awards?

Regan-Blake: [laughs] yeah, the, uh--gah what is that first one called? Excellent or something?

Brooks: The Distinguished--the Circle of Excellence--

Regan-Blake: The Circle of Excellence.

Brooks: Distinguished National Service and the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Regan-Blake: Achievement Award, yeah. Yeah. Trifecta--that's a cool word I like it.

Brooks: You used it.

Regan-Blake: Yeah, um. So, that, and I've gotten a few other awards, um, along the way. There's a West Virginia award that I got, and, um--but I've--I've received, um, praise in lots of different ways, and that's been very gratifying. People who, uh, feel my workshops or my, um, storytelling itself has been life-changing for them. I have a very distinct approach to teaching storytelling. So, a cool thing is I have done a summer workshop for fourteen years--week-long in the summer--and, um, almost every year I've had people from other countries. I had someone--and she was an

American, but she came from Dubai--people that have just found me on the internet, um--a man with Dutch heritage that came from South Africa--a psychiatrist who has been very involved in the, um, reconciliation and travelling through South Africa leading that, who found me on the internet and decided he wanted to come and listen and learn how to tell stories--a young man from India who came two years ago and literally flew from New Delhi to Asheville and stayed two days around here and then flew back to New Delhi--a young guy in his thirties who is a life coach and had heard my storytelling on, you know, the videos and loved my website and came for a workshop. So, I feel like, in my teachings, I have taught people a lot of life skills.

[01:14:25]

One of the real foundations of the way that I approach storytelling--number one is to become a good listener, and that can be life-changing as we become good listeners, both listening to ourselves, and it creates--as you know as a listener--it creates a much deeper relationship with other people. And then as far as people actually telling is starting from a base of what worked--what I call appreciations--and so we're so used to in the, um, artistic world--and whether that's, um, painting or dance or performing or storytelling--we're so used to going to what didn't work--to finding someone who will tell us what was wrong and how it can get better. And I think that can be very damaging to the creative spirit, and so to start with what works, and I have people give voice to that--first to self-appreciation--what they just liked about what they just did in telling the story--whether it was a three-minute memory of an experience they had around water at a lake or a swimming pool when they were a child--they've just done that with a partner--then to give themselves an appreciation, and then sitting without talking and receiving appreciations then from their partner. And I have had the feedback--you know, a lot of people do, uh, wonderful things in their work-life, and they might, at the end of it, get an award, or they might, at the end of the year, get an accolade from one of their co-workers or from a boss or something. But I feel like I get that back every time I'm performing, every time I'm teaching, and every time I'm coaching. It is a remarkable way to walk through life--to be receiving that--and then often, because of the internet and that we're able to get back in touch with people, to hear from people who took a workshop from me in 1996 and that this whole idea of appreciations changed their life and changed their relationship with their spouse--that they're looking for what works as opposed to giving voice to what's wrong. And it's not Pollyanna--it doesn't mean you don't go to make it better--and I call them tweaks--what can make it better--but it's a starting point that's very different. And so, that kind of, uh, way of living my life I am so apprecia--and who would have thought? You know, I am still just amazed. I--over these forty-nine years so far, um--I have never done anything else except this storytelling to make my living, and there's--the vast majority of storytellers, you know, have done--they came to it from teaching, or they came, you know--worked it in with, uh, therapists--that become storytellers or actors--that have done lots of different jobs, and I appreciate their journey, too, but it's just, to me--

it's extraordinary--my own appreciation of that of how the universe has rushed to support me and that this has been able to unfold in this way. Yeah.

Brooks: Um, is it ok if I ask the wrap-up questions?

Regan-Blake: Absolutely.

Brooks: Um, they'll feel a little out of left field 'cause they're not necessarily related to anything we've touched on, um, because they are geared towards talking about you specifically as a woman and, like, how gender might have played or not played a role in your career. Um, so that's--I guess that is--the first question essentially, like, were there any challenges that you faced in your career that you think you faced because of the fact that you're a woman?

Regan-Blake: Um, I think so, and, um, I will say that's an area we didn't get into, and I won't go into it now. But in the early seventies when I first took that job as a storyteller, I was very involved in the National Organization for Women and went to meetings, and I mentioned earlier about some of the groups that I'm still, you know--like those stories of friends that have come along with me during my life--one of those groups is what we called a rap group--that's what they used to call them--it was a consciousness-raising--we would come together for a meeting of NOW, and then you would break up into these groups. One of those groups that we began in 1973--we still meet. And we meet every year, and we're meeting in early May in Chattanooga, and there're five of us, so that has continued.

[01:19:36]

I've always considered myself a feminist, and, um, I feel like so many doors were opened to us as storytellers, and so many people were willing to take a risk to put us on stage that, um, I didn't really feel during a lot of that any kind of negative impact. But what I am--especially in those early days--maybe because we were the only ones that were really doing it for the first, probably, uh, ten years or something like that--some people were telling in their own communities, but travelling in the way we were and such. But, uh, I am definitely aware--and I give voice to this, and I've talked to people about it--that, um, at a lot of the festivals--including this National Storytelling Festival--there is, um, a small group of men--and, um, they are all men--and, um, as we say--and I actually have talked with some of them about this--and we say it with--rolling our eyes--some of the guys that are in this group--and it's white funny guys. And that has been the real focus of this national festival, and it's something I have told that I think is--that we need to be more leading the way. We have some traditional tellers, but I think financially--that that's been a financial decision because that's who seems--the funny guys--are the ones who seem to bring in the audience and keep the audiences coming back. And what they started doing about--maybe as long as fifteen or twenty years ago--is having--there's a core group of about five or six guys who--some of them get invited every year to be featured, and others are

every other year--maybe they're on a one out of three years--but they are the most consistent tellers. And because so many people come to the festival--the national festival--to see who they want to invite at their festivals--it's a model--then a lot of these festivals across the United States are wanting those same six guys--at least one of them there. And they know that they also need some diversity, and the festival does have some diversity, but not in who comes every year and who comes every other year. You know, they're--diversified people--and women in general--are more on a once every four years, or once every five years, or once every twelve years, or something. And--but because so many audiences are seeing that and wanting more of it because it's funny and entertaining--then they go back home, and if they start a festival, they want the same people. They realize--either from their own awareness or from people that are on the board with them starting this festival--that they need diversity, so now it's mostly the Black women that are then going to these festivals with one of these white funny guys, and if it moves out more from that, um, it's often a local or a regional teller. So it definitely has become much harder, um--and I would say in general that it's difficult on people of color--the most difficult on them--because maybe one quote--you know, in quotes--one "diversified" that, you know, is of Spanish [Hispanic] heritage, uh, or, um, Black or Asian--is maybe one person that's coming to a festival--or it's one woman--and a lot of times, again, those people are local--so the national people of color, and the, especially--and especially--the national white women are definitely at a disadvantage on who's being featured at the storytelling festivals. And you're at a disadvantage if you tell traditional stories. "We wanna little taste of that," they say at the festivals, but they want the main part to be funny and personal.

Brooks: How, um--and this might be--I don't know if this might be--I'm gonna ask, just 'cause I'm curious--how is it decided--because a lot of what you're describing in terms of the funny personal stories--it sounds like stand-up comedy to me--so who's in charge of deciding like, "We can invite him because he's a storyteller, and we can't invite him 'cause he's comedian," or does that exist, like?

Regan-Blake: There are almost no comedians.

Brooks: Okay, so if you call yourself a comedian, you're probably not invited [laughs].

Regan-Blake: Well, and also, uh, it might be recognized that, um, some--and I'll tell you just a little of the differences--it might be recognized because there are some comedians--they might be called storytellers because they do more than the one-liners.

Brooks: Right.

[01:24:58]

Regan-Blake: They're doing something of a story. But these people that are telling--and a lot of them are really good--um, it's not my cup of tea for session after session. You know, that national festival starts on Friday morning, and I don't remember how many sessions you can go to, but there's a lot between then and Saturday--Sunday--afternoon. It would not be my--I would like to go to one or two that the focus was on that kind of thing 'cause I thoroughly enjoy them, and they're crafted in such wonderful ways--and different ways. You know, one, um, of those tellers that's very popular--Bil Lepp--he tells, um--he tells--they kind of arise--they sound like they're personal, but they're--what's the kind of storytelling where it's, uh, fanciful--uh, it doesn't really happen--uh, it can't really happen like someone flying through the air?

Brooks: Oh, like magical realism?

Regan-Blake: Yeah, but the type has just--'cause he goes into that, and he does a brilliant job on 'em. So it's not--it's based on some of his childhood memories, but they're, uh--and, you know, he came into storytelling by winning the West Virginia Liar's Contest for three years in a row, and then he got into--

Brooks: Oh, like tall tales? Is that--

Regan-Blake: Tall tales, thank you.

Brooks: Mm-hmm.

Regan-Blake: Yeah. But he's brilliant at it, um, and it's his own created tall tales based in, uh, fact--at least there's some facts--he did grow up in West Virginia--and he goes from there. Um, but they're real stories, so they're not one-liners. You don't really anyone--except maybe in between there might be a few one-liners--they're stories that have a beginning and a middle and ending, and they often--not always--but even ones you'd walk away feeling entertained, and you'd laughed a lot, but if someone asked you, you'd say, "Well there were those tender moments," so there is that within some of the stories that would be different from a comedian as well.

Brooks: Mm-hmm. Okay. Hm, it's interesting.

Regan-Blake: Yeah.

Brooks: Um, great. Um, so back to the, uh--the general--questions. Um, what is your definition of success?

Regan-Blake: It's what I've been describing as a performer on stage and that energy and what I experience when I'm telling the stories. I'm transported as well as the listeners, and that is definitely, um, way up there in my--considering myself to be successful. Having been able to travel to so many different lands--other countries and other cultures--and all over the United States--forty-seven states so far that

I've told stories in--I consider that a success, and having made my living out of it. This idea of all of my works and so much of, um, what has been integral to my journey as a storyteller being housed at the Library of Congress is a huge success to me. I mean I'm the first--and they already have more than anyone else--and there're other storytellers that are gonna be, um--you know, I--because this has been mentioned, or people ask me about it--you know, there are other people that have specific kinds of collections that are maybe gonna be housed--you know, that Todd has been talking to some of these different people. I also--this is a cool thing that I would never have put on a list of what would consider--be considered--success for you, but I am thrilled about it--a fellow storyteller, Milbre Burch--she got her doctorate, uh, in--I don't know if it was in--I don't know if it was the exact title of her doctorate--but it combines theatrical and, uh, spoken-word and that kind of thing--I don't remember the title--but she wrote her dissertation on me, so it is a 500 page--and she made it into a book for me that I have downstairs--and, uh, she actually--you know I didn't really address that a lot about what I have experienced as a woman storyteller--but that is the underlying premise of her, uh, dissertation--is one of the foremothers of this movement and how I have not--in lots of ways--I have been overlooked and not acknowledged and not given the credit that, um, would have been maybe given to a man.

[01:30:11]

Brooks: Yeah.

Regan-Blake: Yeah. That's been an interesting part of this journey--I hadn't even thought about as we were talking, but there's that, too.

Brooks: Well--I mean--and then of course, if people are listening to this or reading through it, they can, I'm assuming, find her dissertation somewhere--

Regan-Blake: Yes, it's definitely online.

Brooks: --as well as your collection--and so, kind of put all the pieces together, um, so that's great. It seems like your whole--you've got a well-rounded story out there--

Regan-Blake: Yeah.

Brooks: --which I think is great. Um, the last question that I try to ask everyone is, um, in your opinion, what is a notable woman?

Regan-Blake: So, I think it's someone who really knows her worth--and whatever that worth might be. And so, whatever skills maybe she's developed, or whatever natural creativity has been a part of her life, I think knowing--her knowing that--and not dependent on someone else observing it--or telling her that--or reassuring her, um--I think that's a notable aspect of being a successful woman. I'm not sure if that's exactly what you meant by your question, but that's something that I really

respect in other people--that we're able to--I think men, in general, can take hold of their accomplishments and, um, be comfortable with receiving praise for those accomplishments and receiving acknowledgements for those accomplishments--I think it's often because of the way--at least here in western world and here in the United States--because of the way women, at least in the past, have been raised, sometimes it's harder to have that confidence 'cause it's not--the confidence I'm talking about comes from inside us. It's not a going-to-workshops-and-learning-how-to-be confident, and then going, Yeah, I really have done a lot. But it's--sometimes those are steps in letting us be able--let me say that a different way--letting us shine the light on our own accomplishments and be comfortable being notable women without any excuses, without having to say, "Oh, well, it's not that," you know, or, "Oh, I did this, but those other people did that." So, it's very different from being arrogant. It's very different from a self-serving kind of approach to life, and I think the way our society works right now in this part of the western world--in general--we have raised men to be more comfortable with that, and I am so delighted when I see more and more women, uh, stepping up and both receiving that light that is shining on them and shining it on themselves, and really letting their natural abilities and their inclinations lead them to a fulfilling life.

Brooks: I think, uh, that's specifically significant to me because when I first started doing research for this project I was paging through, um, a volume that was called, like "Fifty Notable Women of North Carolina," and it was from--oh, I don't remember--I wanna say, like, maybe the forties--um, and almost every single entry ended with, "But she's so humble," like, "You would never know," like, "She won't accept your praise--she won't," like, and that was the attribute that was, like--it was highly touted for each woman--was essentially, like, Oh, you would never know, 'cause like she's so humble, and she just likes being in her house and taking care of her husband. And I mean, some obviously--obvious things--but I always--I found that so interesting the fact that, like, as women, a lot of times we are programmed to be humble and to say, "Oh, no thank you," or, like, have a hard time accepting that praise and recognizing it in ourselves. Um--

Regan-Blake: Yeah, and we're taught that that's a good thing--something to aim for.

Brooks: Right, exactly. 'Cause if you don't--if you do otherwise--then you are being arrogant, or like--and that's not a good look on women--and like, yeah, I think that's good that that seems to be changing.

[01:34:49]

Regan-Blake: And I'll add this just as a little postscript. Again, in workshops and coaching, this is something that I definitely will spend some time on--people being able to take these appreciations. And one of the things that I, uh, say and give as an example is that, if someone comes up to you after a performance--whether it's in the living room where we've just done a partnership or it's on an actual stage--and your first

inclination is to say, "Oh no," or, "Anyone could have," or, "I don't know," and, um, in a sense, we're not validating that other person, and we're not listening to them. I even tell people here in my workshops--I don't let 'em say thank you when someone gives them an appreciation--so everyone knows that, so they're not being rude, and I'll tell people that when you're out there in the world there a lot of situations where--but I personally don't say thank you. I personally put my hand over my heart, often, and will just nod that I have heard what they said. Because what happens--a thank you can sometimes be--it stops the communication, and often--especially with storytelling--when someone's just listened, if that storyteller doesn't say anything, then that person that's listening goes to the next level of their experience. So even though, you know, we look at it and we might call it humility--and I think for a lot of maybe--potentially for those women that were interviewed--it was because that was their place--was to be in that home and you not know--but I think that can extend to today--that this being able to have light shining is not only for ourselves, but it's for others that end up enjoying that light--that they are able to verbalize that to us, and we're able to hear it--we're able to listen to them in that moment. And in that moment, it can embellish the life of the person that's telling you something.

Brooks: Great. I think that's a good place to end if that's alright with you.

Regan-Blake: That sounds good. I have thoroughly enjoyed this, Ellen.

Brooks: Okay, great. Thank you. Well, I'm gonna say thank you, and thank you so much [laughs].

[01:37:14] [End SHEOH_022_02] [End Interview]